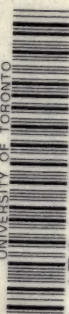


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RICHARD BALDOCK

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HOUSE OF MERRILEES

EXTON MANOR

THE ELDEST SON

THE SQUIRE'S DAUGHTER

THE HONOUR OF THE CLINTONS

THE GREATEST OF THESE

THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH

WATERMEADS

UPSIDONIA

ABINGTON ABBEY

THE GRAFTONS

RICHARD BALDOCK

THE CLINTONS AND OTHERS

RICHARD BALDOCK

AN ACCOUNT OF SOME EPISODES IN
HIS CHILDHOOD, YOUTH, AND EARLY
MANHOOD, AND OF THE ADVICE
THAT WAS FREELY OFFERED TO HIM

BY
ARCHIBALD MARSHALL



155-382
25/6/20

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1919

RICHARD BULLOCK

AN ACCOUNT OF SOME EPISODES IN
HIS CHILDHOOD, YOUTH AND EARLY
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NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1918

TO
MRS. R. C. LEHMANN

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RICHARD BALDOCK

CHAPTER I

AT BEECHURST VICARAGE

"My dear!" said Mrs. Moggeridge, decisively, "I've brought her, and there's an end of it. If there is any difficulty about putting her up in the house—but I don't see how there can be with all these rooms—she can go to the inn—if there *is* a respectable inn in this out-of-the-way place. But a maid I must have to help me into my clothes."

She spread her voluminous silk skirts over the sofa in her sister's drawing-room, patted the smooth plaits of her elaborate *chignon*, and looked about her. The room was a charming one, long and low and oak-raftered, with broad latticed windows looking on to the greenest of gardens, but it was furnished sparsely with a rosewood suite upholstered in crimson, an old cottage piano, a round table upon which were displayed a set of ivory chessmen and a dozen books symmetrically disposed, and very little else. The walls were panelled and painted white. A few chalk drawings of heads and impossible landscapes hung upon them. There was a finely carved mantelpiece and a deep hearth with iron dogs and an elaborate fire-back.

"My dear Jessica," pursued Mrs. Moggeridge, waving a green-gloved hand around her, "I should turn this room completely inside out if it were mine. I

should have those ugly wooden beams properly ceiled in, strip the woodwork off the walls, and cover them with maroon silk finished off with a gold beading, put in a white marble mantelpiece with a steel and ormolu grate, and have a French window instead of those ridiculous diamond-paned things. The furniture I gave you as a wedding-present is good, but more is wanted. I think I will give you a gilt console table. But you cannot do much with a room like this. The best furniture you could buy would hardly make it habitable. As it is at present it is absurdly old-fashioned, grotesque. Yes, gilt is badly wanted, and a green carpet with ferns and roses. I flatter myself that I know at a glance how to set *any* room right."

"Dear Henrietta, you are very generous," said her sister. "But I like the old room. I sometimes think that it was a mistake to turn out all the old-fashioned furniture that belonged to John's grandfather, although it was certainly shabby and had not been looked after properly."

Mrs. Moggeridge held up hands of horror. "Jessica!" she exclaimed. "You are a Goth—a Vandal. That rubbish! When you wrote and gave me a description of it, I ordered the carriage and drove straight to Willows'. 'A suite of drawing-room furniture *at once*,' I cried, 'suitable for the drawing-room of a country rectory, to be occupied by a lady of refinement. Details may be left for the future, but the suite must go off to-day without fail.' And this is the result. You have got *something* that you need not be ashamed of asking your friends to sit down upon. But I am not satisfied, Jessica. I must do more for you. You are my only sister and I am rich. A gilt console table you

shall have. There is one in the breakfast room at Paradine Park that will do. I can replace it. And a chandelier. Ah, but you have no gas. What deprivations you suffer, my darling! Jessica, dearest, do you think you were wise? Love is a great thing, and I know you were in love. I never was, I own it—to you. But look what I have got, and what you have to put up with. My pretty little Jessica! And you might have married——”

“Please don’t, Etta, dear,” pleaded her sister. “I do not regret anything. My husband is wise and good, and——”

“Yes, I know,” broke in the other. “But a poor country clergyman! Well, you have made your choice. But is he everything you thought him? Men so seldom are. Is he severe? From your letter I thought he was severe.”

“He is wise and good,” repeated her sister. “I look up to him, and it is my duty—and my pleasure too—to obey him. Dear Henrietta, I wish you had done what I asked you and left Foster behind. He made such a point of it, and I fear he will be displeased. He is not accustomed to have his wishes set aside. He does not express them without careful thought, and you know I told you his reasons.”

“And very ridiculous reasons they were,” said Mrs. Moggeridge. “It is not to be supposed that I wish to put anybody to expense on my account. The man might have known that, or if not you could have told him. You know what I am. When it was first suggested that I should come here I fully intended to pay my way. Neither you nor your husband shall be loser by me; but naturally under these circumstances I cannot consent to be dictated to as to how I am to travel,

and the notion of my travelling anywhere without Foster is absurd."

"Indeed, Henrietta," replied the other, with some spirit, "if you care to come and visit me you come as my guest—mine and my husband's. You would give him very great offence if you suggested paying your entertainment. I accept your presents because I know you have always loved me, and we have been very much to each other. But you must not look upon us as your pensioners."

"My darling child," said the fashionable woman, speaking with great tenderness, "you must not take amiss what I say. I speak my mind, to you and everybody. But the chief thing is that we are to be together for a time, just as we used to be when I was a tall girl and you were a little tiny thing, in the old home. I would cheerfully eat bread and drink water to be with you, and I should expect Foster to do the same. Nothing shall come between us. And now tell me, my precious one, you have everything you want, you are quite prepared, you are not dreading the time that is coming to you?"

The pale face of the younger woman flushed and her eyes shone. "It will be the greatest happiness," she said. "I dream of it night and day."

"Ah," said the other, her gentleness of voice contrasting strangely with her former sharp and decisive speech. "If I had only had a child! I should have loved it, perhaps as much, dear, as I loved you when you were a baby. Perhaps more, though I do not think that possible. But one's own child——! I should have had someone to spend my riches on. I sometimes grow tired of spending them on myself." She recovered her sprightly tone after a short pause. "Well, that's over

and done with," she said. "I shall certainly never marry again, and I get a great deal of fun out of my money. There will be plenty left for your child, Jessica. He shall have most of it when I'm gone—though I hope he will have to wait some time for it yet. And he shall go to Rugby—papa was a Rugby—and to Oxford, the same college as papa's. I decided that my boy should do that if I ever had one, and I will do the same for yours. I pledge myself to that."

Her sister smiled faintly. "Perhaps it will not be a boy," she said.

"If not," replied Mrs. Moggeridge, "it will be all the better—in this case. I wanted a boy because I made up my mind that Joseph should have a baronetcy—possibly a peerage—as he no doubt would have done if he had lived—and I wished for an heir. But a girl!—a baby girl is the sweetest plaything. And when she grows up I will take her about, and I will see to it that *she*, at any rate, does not marry a poor country clergyman."

Mrs. Moggeridge had not observed the door open behind her as she made this last speech. "A poor country clergyman!" echoed a deep voice by her side. "Here is one who bids you welcome to whatever his house can afford."

"Lord bless the man!" she exclaimed, turning round in a flurry, but not apparently discomposed in her mind. "You gave me quite a start. And so you are the Reverend John Baldock. Well, you've got the greatest treasure I ever had or ever shall have, with all my riches, and I don't know that you should have had her if I had been at home to prevent it. I hope you value her and treat her tenderly."

The man who stood before her, regarding her with

dark serious eyes in which, in spite of his words of welcome, there appeared no hint of indulgence towards her freedom of speech, could have been little accustomed to such a form of address. His face was set in a stern mould. The bones were prominent, the rather thin lips, pressed together, the eyes deep set, direct and searching. To his wife, looking anxiously at him and then at her sister, came a sense of crisis. These two characters by her explored to their depths but to each other unknown, how would they adjust themselves to a common measure of agreement? There must be opposition. The light cement of social complacency would hardly hold against the pull of their natures, that of the one authoritative, dominating, that of the other fearlessly asserting a wayward independence.

John Baldock turned to his wife. His eyes softened. "You have not regretted giving your life to a poor country clergyman, Jessica," he said; and then, taking her hand, "We find our happiness in a common hope and a common pursuit. We do not desire worldly riches. We have enough and are content. You will forgive our inability to provide for the maidservant you proposed to bring with you. The simplicity of our lives and our domestic arrangements would make such an addition to our household inexpedient. We shall hope to make the loss of her services of no account to you."

"Oh, but I've brought her," said Mrs. Moggeridge, lightly. "As I told Jessica, I cannot possibly be without Foster. If you cannot do with her in the house—and that is a matter for you to decide—she must find some sort of lodging for herself. She is quite capable of doing that, or ought to be, for she is forty-five years old if a day, and has been jilted by a postman."

If Mrs. Moggeridge had any idea that the last piece of information, airily thrown out, would relax the obvious tension she was mistaken. There were storm signals out on John Baldock's brow, and he regarded her as if he could hardly believe his ears. Then he threw a look at his wife and his face cleared a little.

"We could not consent to that," he said, courteously. "I have no doubt that her accommodation can be arranged for, as you have——" he hesitated, and then out it came with a flash of the eye—"disregarded my wishes in the matter."

"My dear John," said Mrs. Moggeridge, not at all abashed—"I shall call you John and you must call me Henrietta—when your wishes are so unreasonable you must expect them to be disregarded. Foster will give no trouble—not half as much as I shall—and anybody who wants the pleasure of my society must put up with her. Let us now set the subject aside altogether. You have had your say and I have had mine, and, having come to a compromise like sensible people, we shall no doubt be all the better friends."

John Baldock's view of the compromise, if he felt any inclination to express it, was cut short by the entrance of an old servant, who announced with singular abruptness that tea had been on the table for ten minutes and would get cold if not consumed at once, and then took her departure.

They went into the dining-room; where a very plain meal was set out on a round table. The room was larger than the one they had left. It was panelled, and the mantelpiece carved in oak. The most part of the furniture was old and not very well cared for, but its fitness to the room was so marked in comparison with the incongruities they had left behind them that it

struck even the eye of Mrs. Moggeridge, attuned to the fashions of the time.

"There is an air of repose about these old-fashioned rooms," she remarked as she entered, "that is not altogether unpleasing. If you had a fine mahogany suite here, and the walls hung with oil-paintings in massive frames, the room would at once become impossible. Perhaps it is better as it is. The incongruity is less startling. When they were new these pieces of furniture were no doubt considered very handsome. And they are well made, although, of course, hopelessly out of date."

John Baldock waited until she had finished, and then bent his head devoutly and repeated a long grace, saying the words as if he meant them. When this came to an end and they had taken their seats, he said:

"All the furniture in the house, with the exception of what you were kind enough to give to Jessica, was left to me by my grandfather. No doubt it is old-fashioned, but it serves our needs, and I think nothing of such things."

"Oh, but you should think something of them," replied Mrs. Moggeridge; "the eye should be cultivated as well as the mind. For my part I think a pretty room and bright colours make a deal of difference to your outlook in life. With them you are cheerful and gay. In a dull, old-fashioned room you are gloomy, morose. At least, it is so with me."

"One's thoughts should be set on higher things," replied the clergyman. "With the eye of the mind fixed on eternities worldly surroundings sink into nothingness."

"My dear John," said Mrs. Moggeridge, earnestly, "may I beg of you, as long as I remain an inmate of

your house, to treat me as one of the family and not as a person to be preached at. Such a speech as that, excellent as it would be in the pulpit, is surely out of place at the tea-table. Religion—by all means. But there is a time for everything.”

John Baldock accepted the challenge. “I must tell you at once,” he said, “that in this household we do not relegate our religion to fixed hours and places. We make it our chief thought, and strive to bring it into everything we say or do. We should be unfaithful to our calling if we did otherwise.”

“Well,” replied Mrs. Moggeridge, “every man’s house is his castle, and if you prefer to treat yours as a church I suppose you have a right to. You must do as you please. Only I must say that, fond as I am of church on a Sunday morning and occasionally on Sunday afternoon, I should not care to spend every hour of every day there, and I hope you will remember that.”

John Baldock made no reply, but the set of his mouth and his eyes bent steadily on his plate showed his disapproval, and soon afterwards he retired to his study, leaving the sisters together.

“Will you come upstairs?” said Jessica, shyly. “I should like to show you. But you won’t be scornful, Etta, dear. Everything is so different to what it would have been in your case. You know we are not rich, and John thinks it wrong to spend more than we are obliged on ourselves.”

Mrs. Moggeridge kissed her warmly. “My pet,” she said, “you know you have only to come to me for anything you want.”

They went upstairs to a pleasant room facing west towards the now setting sun. There was a little old cradle in the corner. “It was the one in which John

was rocked as a baby," said Jessica. "He would not let me have a pretty cot."

"Oh, my darling, this is dreadful!" exclaimed her sister. "You can never use that old thing. I will write to London at once for a cot and something nice to cover it."

"Thank you, dear," said the other, quietly. "But I will do with this. John likes to have it so."

She went to an old tallboy chest of drawers and drew from it the little garments, of all others so full of meaning. Not a stitch in them but tells of a hope or a fear or an impulse of love towards the new life that is coming into the world.

They were very plain but beautifully made. She put them into her sister's hand. Some true impulse from the depth of things caused the older woman to refrain from an easy offer to better them. "Ah, the sweet little soul!" she said.

Tears came in a sudden gush from the other. She dried them quickly and tried to smile. "I can't help it," she said. "It is because I am so happy."

"Oh, no," said Henrietta, concernedly. "You are not happy. You didn't cry because you were happy. What is it, Jessica—dearest—my little sister?"

"I suppose it is because I am afraid."

"Oh, no," she said again, wisely. "You are not afraid. You are not afraid. At least, you are not afraid of what is coming to you. Are you afraid of anything else?"

Jessica turned from her almost petulantly, and busied herself about the drawers. "No, of course not," she said. "Henrietta, you must make allowances for me. I cry for nothing at all."

[The old woman who had announced tea an hour be-

fore came into the room. She did not knock, or apologize for her intrusion. Neither did she retire quickly, but went to a cupboard in another corner of the room and began turning over household linen.

There was a pause. Mrs. Moggeridge looked at her sister, and saw her disturbed, her eyes cast down. She drew herself up sharply. "Do you think you could make it convenient to leave the room at once?" she said.

The old woman turned round with a folded sheet in her hand. She seemed completely nonplussed, and stood staring, her face a mottled red.

"Your mistress and I are talking," said Mrs. Moggeridge, "and you came in as if the place belonged to you, without a with your leave or by your leave. If a servant of mine behaved in that way she shouldn't sleep a night longer in my house."

Mrs. Baldock looked up. "Sarah is accustomed to come in and out like that," she said.

"I am not accustomed to it," replied her sister; "and I beg that she won't do it so long as I am in the house."

The old woman bridled up and found her tongue. "I nursed the master in these arms," she said, trembling a little, "and I've been with him ever since he was an infant. I wish to be respectful to my betters, ma'am, as becomes a professing Christian, but——"

"Will you kindly leave the room?" interrupted Mrs. Moggeridge, relentlessly. "Your mistress and I are engaged. Show your respect and your Christianity by doing what you're told."

The old woman retired with black looks, directed chiefly towards her mistress.

"What an intolerable old creature!" exclaimed Mrs. Moggeridge, when the door had closed behind her.

"My dear Jessica, the fact is you are choked up with religion in this house. I have always found religion a most dangerous acquirement for the lower orders, and for servants especially so. They do not understand it as you and I do, and it turns their heads. If I were you I should get rid of that woman instantly."

Mrs. Baldock laughed rather drearily. "I think if I were to suggest that to John he would never recover from the shock," she said. "And I doubt if she would go even if he told her to."

"But, my dearest Jessica, you do not mean that you allow your husband to dictate to you in domestic matters? Why, when Joseph was alive, autocratic as he was, he would never have thought of interfering in such things. He did once inquire after a housemaid I had dismissed for rouging her cheeks. He said he missed her bright face about the house. The hussy! But that was the only occasion. I should not have stood it if it had been otherwise. You really must put your foot down about such things, Jessica, if your life is to be a satisfactory one."

Her sister made no reply. She was sitting by the open window. She looked out on to the green world of summer, and her look was patient and sad.

Mrs. Moggeridge sat down on the opposite side of the table which stood in the window. "Jessica," she said, "your face ought not to be like that. You have a great happiness coming to you. Tell me what it is that is troubling you."

"A great happiness!" she repeated. "I cannot grasp it. I feel that there is a great change coming over my life, but nothing tells me that I shall gain happiness by it. And I want happiness, Etta. I am young, and I want happiness."

"But, dearest, when I had your first letter at Luxor, two years ago, you were happy—really happy, and looking forward to your quiet life here. I saw that it was so, and it made up to me for what I thought you were missing. For I will not disguise from you that I had greater things in view for my only sister than a marriage such as you announced to me. What has occurred to change you so?"

"I don't think I have changed, except that I am older. Oh, much older. I said that I was young and wanted happiness. But I am not young any longer. And yet I still want happiness."

"Then you have not got it. That is very plain. And you ought to have it. You have been only two years married. Time knocks the bloom off every romance, but not so quickly as that if there is a strong foundation for it. Jessica, you are disappointed in your husband."

The younger woman threw out her hands.

"Oh, Etta," she said, "do not say that. Indeed, you must not. It is myself I am disappointed in. You drag everything out of me. I should not have told you, but I cannot allow you to blame John. He is good and wise. I told you so."

"Yes. You have repeated that phrase. You cling to it. Is it the only thing you have to cling to, after two years of married life? Good! Of course he is good in one sense—a clergyman! Is he good to *you*? Does he value your qualities? Is he humble in the face of *your* goodness? Is he thankful for it? Or is he trying all the time to bring you into subjection to some absurd religious standard of his own?"

"Henrietta, you have a sharp tongue. You distort things."

"You have to see things before you can distort them."

"I knew what his views were before I married him. I believed in them. I thought they were noble, and I thought that with his help I should be able to live up to his high ideals. I have failed and I am miserable. And now you have the truth."

"He makes you miserable."

"No, it is not that. Do not say so."

"I do say so. I know what you were at home. Sweet and unselfish, always smiling—smiling out of a pure, kind heart—never an unworthy thought. Oh, I have eyes to see beauty of character though I don't possess it. I wish I did. I'm endowed with riches and an easy, selfish good-nature instead—and penetration—yes, certainly penetration. Your husband is *not* wise if he is blind to your goodness—or good. He is most wickedly foolish in trying to run your nature into his own harsh mould."

"I will not talk of him in that way. He is not like that. He has shown his trust in me by asking me to live on his high level. He believed that I could do it, and I thought so too. But now I know that I cannot. I am losing heart. I cry as often as I smile when I think of my little child that is coming. At first perhaps a great joy—but oh, I am not even sure of that. May I pour out my love on my tiny helpless little baby? Or must I stifle it as I am taught to stifle other impulses I thought natural and even good?"

"Jessica, dearest, you frighten me. The man must be a monster of bigoted cruelty."

"No. But I must go on, now that I have revealed what I never thought to have let fall. I am not allowed to love him as I would have loved him, with passion and

joy. It would be idolatry, displeasing of God. He has such self-control. He asks nothing of me that he does not impose upon himself. He loves me passionately. I have divined it. But he holds himself back. His God is terrible. There, I have said it. Death and judgment are fearful to me now, and I loved God before, and thought I knew Him. And as the years go on, and the little child whom I must not fondle overmuch lest I make it too dependent on my love, grows out of babyhood, I must see it trained and bent to a shape I am too weak to wear; and I must carry a weight on my mother's heart and show sternness where I would be all pity. And who knows what will come later still? Oh, I have thought of it all, through long nights and days. The burden is too much for me. And there is no one to share it."

She broke down and sobbed convulsively. Mrs. Moggeridge looked out into space with wide eyes. "The man has a devil," she said under her breath.

CHAPTER II

AN ENTRY AND A DEPARTURE

OUTSIDE the room where Jessica Baldock lay dying the sun drew long shadows across the grass of the once trim lawns, now a dewy tangle of grass and clover; and all round the unkempt flower garden, more beautiful in its wild state than ever it had been in its days of prosperity, stretched the great forest, mile after mile of glade, woodland, and open heath. For hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years the trees of the forest had swung their green branches into the blue skies of spring, turned red and brown and gold in the autumn and shed their dead leaves in winter, their glory departed, their loss unregarded. And the human life that had bloomed for so short a time in their shadow was drawing to its end, not, like them, to blossom again, unless it were in the more fruitful soil of an unknown country. The inexplicable wastefulness of nature, careless of age or youth or sorrow, was at work. Out of the millions of seeds that had fallen to the earth every autumn from the trees in the forest one or two here and there had perpetuated the growth from which they had sprung. The rest had perished. What was one human life, still young and sweet, in face of this lavish mechanism of reproduction? A new life had been born into the world, and the life that had produced it was fading into stillness.

The doctor had given his verdict. Mrs. Moggeridge had seen him in the bare drawing-room, that monument

of her own incongruous modernity, strangely insignificant of any impress from the personality of her who had occupied it, unlike the rest of the house and the common life that went on within its walls. The masterful spirit impressing itself everywhere else had ignored this room, and it was without colour, meaningless. The relentless verdict of death, spoken here, called forth no echo of incredulity from inanimate trifles made alive by association. It came with cold force and gripped the brain. "It cannot be so," Mrs. Moggeridge had cried, but her tone carried no conviction, unless it were to contradict her words.

The doctor was a thin, elderly man, nervous and hesitating, but the downright manner of his questioner plucked the truth out of his hesitations. "She is sinking now," he said. "It is only a question of hours."

"Is there *nothing* to be done?" she said. "Another opinion?"

"Another opinion would only confirm mine," he answered, "and by the time we could get it she would be dead."

"Oh, how terrible it is! Could nothing have been done before? She seemed well yesterday evening. Why did you leave her through the night? It was only this morning she began to fail."

"It *was* only this morning," he said, gravely. "There was no reason for me to stay through the night."

"Then it was the nursing. There ought to have been a professional nurse."

The doctor was silent.

"Is that old woman incompetent?" Mrs. Moggeridge pressed him. "I dislike her, but I thought she was a good nurse. She nursed my brother-in-law, and has

been with him ever since. I was shocked at first to hear that no trained nurse was engaged, but did not press the point because I thought she would be as good. Was I wrong?"

The doctor twisted his fingers nervously. "I should have preferred a professional nurse," he said.

"Then it is that. Oh, why didn't I insist? And you say it is too late. But why am I talking here when there is so little time? I must go to her." She left the room hurriedly, and went upstairs.

The slight figure on the bed lay motionless, very pale, the eyes closed. John Baldock was sitting by the pillow, his head bent in his hands. The little wooden cradle stood by the fireplace, and Sarah, the old servant, was busying herself with water and flannels. Her face was interested, her movements active. Tending the life that had just come to be, she seemed quite detached from the tragical slipping away of the other life, now near its final extinction.

Mrs. Moggeridge stood over her like a vengeance, in terrible cold anger. "Go out of the room," she said in a tense whisper. "It is you who have killed her. You shall not be in here."

The old woman looked up at her in a frightened manner. She did not attempt to excuse herself, nor did she show indignation at the charge. "The baby," she whispered, tremulously.

"What does the baby matter now? Take it away and go at once into another room, and don't come back here again. I can't bear to see you."

She obeyed without a word, making two or three journeys, and leaving the room finally to the now undisturbed influence of death.

Mrs. Moggeridge cast one look at the bowed figure

of the man by the bedhead, a direct look of intolerant dislike, almost of hatred. Then she sat down on the other side of the bed, and gazed fixedly at the still figure lying on it. Her face grew tender, broke into tearless contortions, became calm again. They sat for a long time in silence, while the evening sunlight on the wall shifted a space and the breath of the forest came through the open casement. Then John Baldock raised his head and looked at his wife.

Suddenly he threw himself on his knees by the bed, and began to pray. "Oh, God!" he cried. "Save her. Bring her back to me. Take away this bitter cup which I cannot drink; this burden which is too hard for me to bear."

"It was she who bore the burden," Mrs. Moggeridge flashed back at him. He continued, without noticing her.

"If I have been blind to Thy will, blind to grace which came from Thee, but which I could not understand, forgive me, and remove the punishment from me. Thou art all powerful. I believe it, I know it. Thou canst do this great thing. Thou Who didst raise Lazarus from the very grave itself, and didst give life to the son of the widow, Life-giver, Healer, grant the prayer of Thy servant who puts his trust in Thee, and put back the hour of death—if it be Thy will. Oh, Lord, make it Thy will."

The language of the man in dire distress fashioning the cry that came from the depth of his heart into conventional smooth-slipping words aroused in Mrs. Moggeridge's mind a fury of scorn and anger. She heard nothing but the glib speech. The self-accusing bitterness failed to reach her.

"Cant!" she cried. "And at such a time as this!

You who have ruined a life and crushed the only spark of love in this dreary house! Take your punishment and keep silent. Let her die in peace."

The pale face on the pillow was motionless. The brain was already groping in eternities, or comatose, dying with the body. Who could tell? Whatever might be, it was deaf to the voices of the world.

John Baldock raised his dark face to the shrill accuser. He seemed to observe her presence for the first time. "Why do you come between us now?" he said. "Leave me alone with her—with her and my God."

"Your God!" she sneered. "What a God! The product of your own vain cruel imagination. One thought of hers had more of God in it than all your harsh rules and sermons. Oh, why did I let you have her? My little sister!" She became all tenderness again, and threw herself on her knees by the bed, crying, in tears:—

"Oh, don't leave us, Jessica, my darling! We shall become hard and worldly without you. Stay with us, little sister, and help us to be good."

"Pray to God," said the man, sternly. "Join your prayers to mine, and He may grant them."

She rose from her knees. "No," she said, quietly. "It is of no use. You know it as well as I do. Let us keep quiet. We may be troubling her."

Once more he buried his head in his arms, and prayed with terrible concentration and fervour, agonizing in spirit, with fierce determination against the decrees of unanswering fate, bruising his faith upon the stony silence, unregarded alike in his revolt and his angry remorse. Mrs. Moggeridge, hope departed, acquiescent already in the inevitable, sat quietly, watching him in

a mild stupor of curiosity, her power of feeling relaxed. By and by there was complete silence in the room, broken only by the child's distant wailing—the tiny child who recked nothing of the great loss for which he might have wailed so bitterly.

John Baldock rose from his knees and took his seat by the bed. Whatever his prayers had been during the time in which his lips had uttered no word, they had brought him something which he had not gained from his tempestuous cryings. His face was lined and grief-stricken, but it was no longer in revolt. He kept it fixed on his wife. Mrs. Moggeridge sat with her eyes before her, her face clear of expression. And again there was silence.

There came a faint disturbance over the pale face of the dying woman, a flicker of life very weak, the shadow of a breath, and again silence, complete and final.

John Baldock rose to his feet and kissed her gently on the brow. "God's will be done," he said, solemnly.

Mrs. Moggeridge started up with a wild cry, and flung herself on the bed. "Oh, no, it can't be!" she wailed. "How cruel to take her! Oh, God, how cruel!" She lost control over herself and beat her breast with her hands, sobbing and crying incoherent words.

"God's will be done," said John Baldock again.

CHAPTER III

FRIENDS AND OCCUPATIONS

RICHARD BALDOCK, started on the race of life under a penalty somewhat severe, will be the hero of the following pages, of which a few may well be devoted to the tale of his early years. It is a question how far tender pity for his motherless state may be indulged in without giving way to unreasoning sentiment. His deprivations were positive and need not be disregarded, but he had compensations which must be considered against the debit side of his life account.

It is a pleasant thing to think of the first steps along the pathway of life taken by the child of good and happy parents. He is lapped round with love, and knows nothing of any other characteristic of human-kind. The world he has come to must be very like the world he has left. Neither of them contains for him selfishness, anger, cruelty, or any of the evil passions of humanity, for with all our faults on our heads we show him nothing of our nature that is not godlike. He sets out upon his journey through a country empty of danger or darkness, its air warm and kindly, its meadows smiling with flowers, protected on every hand, but knowing not the need of protection, and so fearlessly drawing with unspoilt confidence on the measureless stores of love around him. His first smile is an event, and every milestone of intelligence he passes eagerly noted. There he lies, "fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses, with light upon him from his father's eyes," the centre of countless hopes and plans and ambitions, of

infinite importance, one of life's most precious treasures. To think of all the gracious influences he sheds around him in his unconscious babyhood is to grasp much of the goodness of the world and to forge a weapon against the pessimist.

Yet it must be confessed that the child for his part takes all the love and care with which he is surrounded very much as a matter of course, and accepts the worship tendered him with coolness. In the case of babies who are deprived of the atmosphere of adoration—and Richard Baldock was one of them—we may be permitted and even encouraged to doubt whether they miss it. Consciously they cannot do so in the early days, and afterwards, if pity is brought to bear upon them, it must be with discretion.

Pity, in his case, could hardly be withheld altogether. His father was without that passionate affection for little children which some men share with most women, and could not make up to him for the loss of his mother. Doubtless he loved his son, but there was no foolishness in his love, and the foolishness of a mother's love has something to do with its divine quality. Until the baby began to walk and to prattle he took but little notice of it, and when he did he began to correct it, assuming the responsibilities of education very early, so that the child's dawning knowledge of his father, if he could have analysed it, would have been of a man who existed chiefly for the purpose of saying "Thou shalt not."

Deprived thus of a mother's love and of a father's tenderness, the child had nothing to fall back upon in his early years but the care of old Sarah, his nurse, who might have made up to him in some measure, if she had been so constituted, for the lack of both. But

Sarah was not so constituted. The light vouchsafed to her was the reflection of the religious creed held by John Baldock, and she also said "Thou shalt not" with overmuch frequency. According to her lights she did her duty, and probably the only child she tended from infancy was the only being in the world she really cared for. At the same time she was unconscionably harsh and captious, and had nothing to give which would have made up in the slightest degree for the mother-love of which the child had been deprived. Certainly he was unfortunate in this respect, because most women in her place would have been able to make up for it in some measure, and he would have felt the advantage, even if she had been at less pains to attend to his spiritual welfare. How many women, if a very little child came to them holding up a piteous face for sympathy over a hurt, could have refrained from taking it in their arms to comfort it with murmurs and rockings? And this was a motherless child towards whom she stood for protection and pity. But she never did that. Tears were naughtiness from the earliest days, and vigorously scolded. Childish falls and accidents were carelessness, and therefore naughtiness again, and rebuked as such. High spirits, involving noise, were naughtiness. Hunger, leading to undue celerity in the consumption of food, was of course naughtiness. Absence of hunger, occasioned by the appearance of tapioca pudding, was naughtiness. Sarah kept a sharp look-out for naughtiness in the shoals of the little Richard's nature as a pilot for hidden rocks, and struck it with astonishing frequency. The aggregate of her discoveries as to his character and tendencies was summed up in the word "limb," and if she did not always add "of Satan," she always meant it.

And yet little Richard loved his Sarah, took her many scoldings and her absence of tenderness philosophically, as the ordained portion of small boys, not knowing any better, and put up with the conviction, persistently drummed into him, of his shining unworthiness, as best he might. If he grazed his knees she did bind them up, although she allowed his lacerated spirit to heal of itself. If he was ill he was made to feel that the illness had some intimate connection with the fact of his being a limb, but he was most carefully nursed back to health. His everyday wants were attended to. In fact, he was cared for, and if he was cared for, as has been said, without tenderness, not knowing what tenderness could be he did not greatly miss it, and it is possible that on that account he gained more in self-reliance and self-control than he lost in happiness.

And after all, Sarah was not always nagging. Richard and she passed together many hours of intimate companionship. The fact that from his earliest childhood he regarded the Bible as the most interesting of books he owed entirely to her. Her gift of exposition was remarkable, and she made the characters that walked and talked and strove with one another in the beginning of the world as real to him as the men and women of his father's parish. The historical books of the Old Testament were her favourites, which was fortunate for him, but they both had a decided liking for the Book of Revelation, and frequently dipped into the Gospels, particularly that of St. Luke.

On one delightful summer Sunday evening, when they were alone in the house and perfect stillness and a sort of golden dusk enwrapped them, they allowed their minds to dwell on an alleged promise that each of us hereafter would inhabit a mansion. A mansion, ex-

plained Sarah, in answer to inquiries, was a large and beautiful house. Was the Rectory a mansion? The suggestion was scouted. Was the Hall a mansion, then? Yes; and Richard's mind went off in a canter of delightful anticipation, increased to a gallop by the information that it was a mere hovel in comparison with the desirable residences whose amenities they then spent a pleasant hour in discussing. He was recalled to earth by the return of his father from church, and a sudden statement to the effect that he was not to regard himself as eligible for a tenancy unless he showed a marked, and, as it seemed to him, even a miraculous increase of goodness.

On another happy evening they explored the possibilities of Hell, regarded as an opportunity for ingenious torture. It was winter and a big ripe fire glowed in the grate of the nursery.

"How would you like," inquired Sarah, "to put your finger into that and keep it there?"

Richard hastened to reply that he should not like it at all, half afraid that for his soul's health she might think it advisable for him to try. But as his last ebullition of naughtiness had been connected with experiments having to do with the flame and wax of a candle and a red-hot hairpin which had not turned out as he anticipated, a further object-lesson was not deemed necessary.

"Ah," said Sarah, "you cried in your wickedness when you burnt the smallest part of your finger. Think of the pain when every inch of your body burst into flame. And there'll be no Sarah to bind it with an oiled rag. The pain will go on, ah, and get worse, for ever and ever and ever!"

Richard was fascinated by this amiable conception,

and they pursued it further. He did not take her adjuration personally, nor did she mean him to. She was in high good-humour and surpassed herself in her imaginative excursions, binding down her God to a monstrous cruelty, the idea of which if he had not been blessed with more than the average scepticism of healthy childhood, might have sent him gibbering into idiocy.

Well, that was Richard's Sarah, and with all her faults he loved her, for she stood to him for what he knew of motherhood, and they were often very comfortable together. He used to think sometimes in after years that if a few drops of that rain of love which is the birthright of every child brought into the world had fallen upon him, it would have found fruitful soil, and might very well have tempered the aridity of his naughtiness, of which so much was made in his childhood. But there was no one to give it him, and he had to do without.

One other friend he had in his father's household, Job Wilding, gardener and groom. Martha, the only other indoor servant, may be omitted, because she was stone deaf and liable to periodical fits of aberration besides, so that what with her bodily infirmities and a somewhat morose and grudging habit of mind, she was not a person upon whom affection could conveniently be lavished, nor was she apparently capable of returning it if it had been.

Job Wilding was elderly and rather bent, and, like the bones in the scriptural valley, he was very dry. His conversation, when he vouchsafed it, was a great pleasure to little Richard. It had so many unexpected twists and turns, and there was a kind of sporting excitement in watching it carefully for the sake of a hidden joke, which you might come upon at any mo-

ment under the innocent-looking form of words which concealed it. The concealment would usually have been complete had not Job's eye acted the part of a pointer in marking down the game. He would bend his gaze upon whatever he might be doing while he talked, until he had spoken the sentence that contained the pleasantry, when a single glance, flicked obliquely at his listener, would set him reconsidering, seldom without reward.

There was this added charm to little Richard about Job's companionship, that it was always uncertain, until he tried, whether he would get it or not. For days together Job would be quite affable in his acceptance of his society, ready to talk and even to be talked to, and, on the other hand, he would suddenly veer round in the middle of a regular spinney of humours, his eye flickering at every other sentence, and send him packing off out of his sight as if he were an offence under Heaven. This inequality of behaviour on Job's part the child accepted with the same equanimity which he brought to bear upon his father's severity and Sarah's nagging tongue, and liked him none the worse for it. Job spent his time doing interesting things with his hands, and on this account alone Richard would have envied him greatly, for his own duties in the world were the learning of hard things out of books, and his pastime to try to do the very things Job earned his living by.

How Job came to be and remain part of a household ruled over by a man of John Baldock's convictions it would be difficult to say. He was a commoner of the great forest of which the parish of Beechhurst formed a part, and held a diminutive holding, exercising his rights of pasture and pannage and the rest, and frequently staying away for a day or two to look after

his own affairs without leave or subsequent apology. This form of independence, however, was taken for granted in that part of the world by anyone who cared to employ a forester in his service. What it is difficult to understand John Baldock taking for granted was the fact that Job was never by any chance to be found in church. Although a clean-living man, he was in an undoubted state of perdition, judged by the standards used by his master. He was also, in accepted parlance, a scoffer, for he made no secret of his total unconcern over those matters held by John Baldock as all-important. He did not "hold with religion," and said so whenever he felt it to be required of him. And yet he was never sent about his business. Perhaps he would not have consented to go.

Between Job and Sarah there was a great gulf fixed. She frequently told him that if she were in the master's place she would send him packing without any ceremony for a godless, idle creature; and he with a command of Scripture that was somewhat remarkable, considering his churchless proclivities, would retort with a biting quotation, directed against women in general and brawling women in particular, that sent her into a fury. In her more serious Bible readings she would identify Job as possessing all the recognizable characteristics of that curious abstraction known as "the sinner," or "the wicked," leaving little Richard with the impression that King David and King Solomon must have missed a deal of pleasant society through their prejudices; and of course she frequently forbade the child to imperil his meagre hopes of ultimate salvation by consorting with such an obvious reprobate. These injunctions he disobeyed, and with comparative impunity, for she never called in his father in aid of

them. His philosophy taught him early that if his naughtiness were so everywhere apparent, he might as well suck some advantage of it.

If the people among whom he lived were not such as to add greatly to the happiness of a child, little Richard's surroundings in other respects were enviable. The old rectory, shabby, rambling, and out of repair, but quiet and beautiful, stood in the midst of an overgrown garden whose amenities were so impossible to cope with by the energies brought to bear on them by Job that those parts of it not devoted to fruit and vegetables were allowed to relapse into wilderness. The dense shrubberies and massy trees were a very treasure house of the secrets of nature, and Richard would have been a personage among the village boys if for no other reason than that he had unrestrained access to these *arcana*, which they pried into only under extreme peril. Dewy dawns of early summer, blossoming lilacs, liquid thrush notes, or grass in shade, sun-flecked, had power in after years to bring back to him the delights of that green garden of his childhood.

And all around this garden, divided from it indeed in one place only by a tottering fence, stretched mile after mile of the great forest, deep woodland alternating with sandy heath. Never was such a playground for nature-loving youth, and his earliest impressions were indissolubly mixed up with it. He had only to creep through a gap in the fence, hidden by a bush of syringa, to find himself in a forest glade, with great clean nobly-branching beeches springing from its green and russet floor, giant dark glittering hollies, level stretches of bracken in sun and shade, and a sense of vastness and freedom over all as the track wound on into the unexplored distance far beyond the limits of his wander-

ings. Here he might play for hours with no companionship save that of the creatures of the forest, and never feel alone or afraid. There were the rabbits lopping across the rides, the busy wood-pigeons and harsh-voiced jays, the pleasant notes of more tuneful birds, the chattering squirrels, the insistent but companionable cuckoo. Sometimes a drove of black pigs would cross his path, fussily intent on their ovesting, more rarely a herd of fallow deer. Events to be remembered were the sight of a red deer, majestically pacing, or a fox trying to steal hidden through the undergrowth, or an otter, timid-eyed but unsuspecting of his presence, seeking its supper in a secret pool.

Of the multitudinous occupations and excitements of a more sociable character afforded by the forest there were enough to provide a varied round of amusement from January to December. On New Year's Day the village boys would go out "squoyling." Armed with loaded sticks, of a sufficiently formidable character when they sometimes turned them against their fellows, they would wage war upon the squirrels, bringing them down with wonderful dexterity by throwing their "squoyles" at them as they crouched on the leafless branches of the trees. Richard never liked this pastime and removed himself from the company of his fellows whenever it was afoot. In fact, he grew to be shy of all forms of forest sport, spending so many hours as he did alone with the hunted birds and beasts, and looking on them as his friends.

One glorious day in May a pack of itinerant otter hounds met at Beechurst, and Richard, then about twelve years old, followed them up and down a stream deep in the heart of the forest, pushing through the aromatic bog-myrtle and wading the pebbly shallows

all through the early hours of the morning, happy and excited. But the end of that was that the hounds and the crowd of alien followers, strange men and stranger women in rough tweeds, noisy and eager, invaded the secrets of the pool which he was persuaded until that time was known to him alone, and killed their quarry there. It was the same otter that he had watched feeding the evening before, in contented security, and as she died she turned her brown eyes reproachfully on him, and he fancied she thought that he had betrayed her. He never ran with the otter hounds again.

Nor did he hunt the deer more than once or twice, although he could always have found some sort of a pony to carry him, in that country where ponies could be had, or at any rate used, for the asking. All his life through he shrank from the bloody climax of field sports, however legitimate. In those days he was probably somewhat ashamed of this shrinking, which was instinctive and not reasoned, and it was not strong enough to prevent his taking a keen interest in those phases of any sport that had to do with woodcraft. He was astir many a time at cold dawn to accompany a "harbourer," whose duty it was to mark down a warrantable buck to the hidden covert whence he was presently to be awakened by the sage old "tufters" and cut off from his companions, so that the rest of the pack could hunt him unconfused; and his pride was great when he first realised that his company was permitted by this otherwise morose and unapproachable functionary because his knowledge of the deer and their ways was considered of value. He was more than content with those early stages of the chase, and ran off home when the hounds had got fairly to work and taken the thronging turmoil of the field after them.

The kind of hunting he did enjoy, perhaps because there was no ultimate bloodshed involved in it, was the rounding up of the ponies, when it was brought home to those at other times unfettered denizens of the forest that they were as much under obligations to humanity as their sleeker brethren who passed them bitted and saddled along the roads and bridle-paths. What times those were for the boy when he was asked by some owner of mares running in the forest to take part in a colt hunt, and spent the day galloping over the heaths and through the woodlands in chase of the scandalised little creatures with their rough coats and shaggy manes, who did their cunning best to shake off the peremptory invitation to civilization. A summer day spent thus in the open air and amidst such surroundings by a healthy boy exercising skill and endurance, with no anxieties of mind or responsibility to mar the delight of the body, is a life possession of enjoyment to be hoarded in the memory. And Richard had many of them to look back upon.

And apart from these excitements, there was always some activity afoot which provided him with interest all through the year. He would help Job to cut his commoner's share of peat, and that of his father, when the permits were assigned in the late autumn. They would go up to their apportioned plot of ground on the heath and cut it into squares like a chessboard, taking one and leaving two, according to forest law. Earlier still they had carted their harvest of russet bracken, which was used for litter, and occasionally for thatching. Sometimes, in winter, there was the glorious excitement of firing the gorse, when great tangles of an acre or more would toss fiery arms high into the night, when fire-flakes and billows of smoke would go

sailing off in the wind, and you could not come within many yards of the conflagration, because of the heat. Then there was the mystery of hurdle-making to be learnt in an April copse, close pollarded, a carpet of primroses; and the felling of timber, for which Richard might be fortunate enough to borrow an axe, and after an hour's diligent chopping produce a ragged and shameful stump which his neighbour would have left clean and smooth with a dozen well-directed strokes.

These were only a few of the constant occupations which went on in the forest, and in which the boy took his part, laying up for himself a store of pleasant memories which he valued the more the older he grew, and especially when his life came to be spent in far different surroundings. The charm of the free forest life, delightful enough to those who first experience it in manhood, was to Richard Baldock, who reached the heart of its mysteries at an age when the mind is most affected by outside impressions, an emotion almost poignant. All the days of his childhood and youth were gladdened and the deprivations of his home life soothed by it. The motherhood of nature, to him who had never known his mother, was no mere phrase, but a very real thing.

CHAPTER IV

RICHARD LEARNS HIS LETTERS

WHEN Richard Baldock reached the ripe age of five his education in letters was taken in hand. More fortunate children are lured over the first steps in the path of learning in many artful and pleasant ways, make warm friends with the letters of the alphabet on their nursery floors, and have a nodding acquaintance with some of them in conjunction before it is time to show them in their true colours, as task-masters and not as playmates. Richard went into his father's study at nine o'clock on the morning of his fifth birthday, as ignorant of the alphabet as he was of the algebraical signs, and came out of it an hour afterwards in tears and black despair.

John Baldock chose little Richard's birthday on which to commence operations because he was a man of method and had no glimmering of an idea of the importance of such festivals in the calendar of childhood, having forgotten his own long since. Between the time of his leaving the University and taking Orders he had been an assistant master in a public school, a fair scholar and a painstaking teacher, and he looked forward to undertaking the early stages of his son's education with some eagerness, judging him intelligent and capable of developing quickly under systematic individual tuition.

Behold, therefore, a small curly-headed figure, dressed in a holland blouse, seated upright at the table at a

height made convenient by a large volume of the Septuagint between himself and his chair, gazing with wide-open, serious blue eyes at a series of cabalistic signs in bewildering numbers, each of which he was expected to greet by name after a single introduction. The book chosen for his initiation was no lavishly pictured child's alphabet with enlightening representations of archers and frogs and butchers, but an old church Bible with large print, his father having a desire, which he would have been shocked to hear described as sentimental, that his first acquaintance with the art of letters should be made through the medium of holy writ.

John Baldock was a votary of the impatient method of teaching. He had fussed and fumed through many a Fourth Form lesson in days gone by, wasting a great deal of his own energy and that of his pupils in a running commentary on their individual and collective stupidity, and he treated his little five-year-old son in the same manner as he had been accustomed to treat the idle sixteen-year-old hobblederoys who had collected like a sediment at the bottom of his form twenty years before. The consequence was that the child grew first of all bewildered, and then frightened, and finally, when his father had reduced him to a state in which he could do nothing with him, he sent him out of the room in disgrace and bemoaned his own fate in having a son who was both stupid and obstinate.

Little Richard knew better than to take his troubles to Sarah, and ran out into the garden to Job, who, although not entirely reliable as a comforter, possessed arts which could stop tears if he cared to exercise them. On this occasion he proved more complacent than usual.

"Why, Master Richard," he said, cocking an eye

from behind a gooseberry bush which he was stripping, "you be a-bellowing like a toad with the rheumatics."

Interest in this suggested zoological freak caused a pause in the lamentations, which Job filled in by an inquiry as to their cause.

"See here now," he said when this had been convulsively explained to him. "I'll learn you to spell a word. Now what does this stand for?" He disposed a dozen gooseberries carefully on the gravel of the path in the rough shape of a letter. Richard, his sobs still shaking him, expressed a timid ignorance.

"Well, if you was to ask me before breakfast," said Job, "I should say it was a Har, and I shouldn't say no different after supper, not if you was to take me out and shoot me for it. Now, what do you say it be?"

"Capital R," replied Richard, with a flash of memory, his tears stopped and his interest aroused by this novel method of tuition.

"Never mind about the capital," said Job. "We ain't got no call to be so particular, not with gooseberries. That's a Har—Har for Richard, and if anybody says it ain't, my address is well known and I'm to be found there regular after six. Now, supposing you was to take two postes and lean 'em together, and tie another one across 'em, you'd get a letter, I suppose, and not one of the puzzlers neither."

"That would be an A," said little Richard.

"Nobody knows that better than you," continued Job, "and now you've got two of 'em. Now if you was to take and turn my gooseberries so's the Har, instead of waving his tail abroad, was to tread on it with his foot, there'd be your letter 'B' and you've got R.A.B. Now take three rungs of a ladder and

knock away one side, and you'll get a letter 'E' what you might be proud to see facing you in a printed book, and there's your R.A.B.E. Only one more and you've got a word as good as any of 'em. Stick a post in the groud and another one acrost his top, and what's that letter?" He exemplified it with the aid of two sticks.

Richard shook his head. "I've seen it," he said, "but it's gone out of my head."

"Well, if that ain't as proper a letter T as ever the greatest scholard in the world wrestled with," said Job, "there's no obligin' nobody. An' there you've got 'em. Five good 'uns. R.A.B.E.T. And what word might that spell, now?"

"I don't know," said Richard. "I don't know spelling."

"Well, you will some day, and you'll never forget as Job first learned you how to spell a word. That word's raab't. R.A.B.E.T., raab't; and if you was to go into the yard and look behind the coachhouse door I shouldn't wonder but what you was to find a little raab't in a hutch what's fond o' lettuces, and here's some to take to him. And another day I'll learn you how to spell pie." This last witticism was fired at Richard's retreating back.

Here was success in consolation indeed. The shadow of the alphabet departed from Richard's path for the rest of that day, which even Sarah celebrated by the production of a birthday cake, and he was as happy as it was his nature to be.

But the next day it began again. Richard showed unshaking precision in recognizing five out of the twenty-six letters, but his poor little exasperated brain refused to hold any more. Again he retired in tears.

Job had taken a day off, but the rabbit was some comfort. He was talking to it quite happily, having shaken off for the time being the memory of his morning's reverses, when his father came upon him suddenly.

John Baldock's appearances in his stable-yard were rare. Richard's fondling words died on his lips, and he stared up at his father with frightened eyes, crouching on the ground before the hutch with the rabbit on his lap.

"Where did you get that from, Richard?" asked the autocrat.

"Job gave it me for my birthday."

"You should have told me about it. I do not wish you to keep animals without my knowledge. They consume produce."

"Oh, mayn't I keep my rabbit? I do love my rabbit!" cried Richard, his fear of his father driven out by a greater fear.

"I will not take it away from you now you have it. But you do not deserve a present, and if I had known I should have forbidden Job to give you one until you had pleased me over your lessons. You may keep it for the present, but I warn you, Richard, that if you do not amend I shall take it from you. Presents are not for idle and obstinate children. If I see a marked improvement in you from to-morrow, you may keep your rabbit. If not it will be taken from you." And the man of responsibilities walked off to point out the way of salvation to a sick parishioner.

Richard, with the terrible fear of losing his first pet to confuse him still further, made but a sorry exhibition of learning the next morning and the morning after that, and on the third day the threat of

sequestration was carried out. "Come with me," said John Baldock, and he marched off to the stable-yard, followed by Richard, crying as if his heart would break.

Job was found washing the wheels of the gig.

"Well, Master Richard, I be ashamed of you, that I be," he said, when the mission was explained to him. "Didn't I learn ye five good letters a Monday, and didn't you suck 'em in like mother's milk?"

Richard, his anguish receiving a further wrench from hearing his former ally thus shamelessly siding against his, howled acquiescence.

"He will not learn them from me," said John Baldock, his face a mask of severity.

"Dear, dear!" said Job, "what terrible hearing! Here be I, a poor labouring man, learning of you five letters in five minutes with a few onripe gooseberries and a bundle of peasticks, and your father, great scholar as he is, and a holy man, besides, using his great powers of mind, and you won't learn nothing. Why, anybody 'ud think he didn't know the right way to go to work. That they would."

Richard's trouble, in no wise abated by this speech, became more vocal than before. "Stop that noise," said his father, impatiently; and, when he did not obey, being past the stage of self-control, "Then go back to my room and wait there till I come to you."

"Now this here raab't," pursued Job, evenly, when the little forlorn figure had slowly withdrawn itself, "if you was to take and brandish a lettuce in front of 'er face, and poke it at 'er nose, might go hungry, and yet raab'ts is not onwilling as a general rule to consoom lettuces. Them as is bred up on parables, so to speak, can take 'em or leave 'em."

"Is it true that you taught the child some letters on Monday?" asked John Baldock.

"Is it true that the child shows acquaintance with a R and a A and a B and a E and a T whenever he comes acrost 'em?" asked Job in return.

"He does know those letters, and very few besides."

"Oh, the evil passions of the human 'eart! The raab't will consoom a lettuce leaf when insinuated into 'er by the poor ignorant man at sixteen shillings a week and refuse a banquet poked at 'er by the great scholar."

"Enough of this folly. The child is obstinate, and as a punishment you are to take that animal away. He shall not have it."

Job faced him squarely, with an angry light in his eyes.

"Then I takes myself away with it," he said. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, that you ought, a aggravating a bit of a thing like that till he don't know a A from a ampersand. He's sharp enough, and so you'd know it, if you wasn't so choked up with your own Christian pride."

"Leave Christianity alone. What do you know of it who never set your foot inside a place of worship?"

"I'll set my foot in a place o' worship when them as is most regular there shows me an example I feel like follerin'. I wouldn't treat a stupid harse like you treats your own flesh and blood. Master Richard—if I could 'a 'ad a child without his mother—he's just the child I should 'a liked to have 'ad, and I'd 'a made something of 'im. If you'd 'ad a angel from 'eaven you'd 'a found something wrong with 'im and took away his raab't for not doing something you won't let him do. You don't desERVE neither wife nor child, and if you're not careful he'll be took from you like the other was."

John Baldock turned and went out of the stable-yard without a word. He remembered a night five years before when a prayer wrung out of the depths of his heart had borne to the skies his conviction of error. For the first time since the birth of his little son he asked himself whether he was in danger of repeating that error. His conscience, often tortured with self-questionings, was in much the same state of timidity as a worried pupil taught to twist his mind to so much knowledge from outside that he is shy of obtruding his own. Turned, however, to this question John Baldock's conscience spoke up with a wealth of accusations which only increased the more they were rebutted. He was treading exactly the same road as had brought him such pain and contrition five years before.

If only this hard, narrow, upright man had possessed a trace of tenderness! The pathetic little figure, o'erwhelmed by a grief as deep as its cause was trivial, which met his gaze as he entered his study, might have touched with anguish the heart of another man on the way to a conviction of his own injustice. John Baldock had no such feeling. The child's sobs irritated him. No impulse moved him to caresses or the few words which would have brought sunshine where now was heavy cloud. He must still play the schoolmaster.

"Richard," he said gravely, "leave off crying and listen to me. You know I have not been pleased with you. I have thought you obstinate and idle, and I have punished you for being so. You learnt some of your letters from Job. Why will you not learn them from me?"

The answer was obvious. John Baldock from the height of his own knowledge had so bullied and bad-

gered his pupil that he had put it out of his power to learn anything. But Richard was too young to make the answer. "I don't know, father," he said, tremulously.

"Could you learn from someone else, do you think?"

This gleam of light roused the small brain to an effort.

"If you'd let Job teach me my letters, father, with gooseberries and sticks, I would remember them."

"I do not intend to let Job teach you. He is an ignorant man, and has other things to do. But it seems to be useless for me to try to teach you myself at this stage. You either cannot or will not learn from me. I must think what is to be done. Learn you certainly must from somebody. You would not like to grow up an ignorant man like Job, would you?"

Now Job was to Richard the embodiment of wisdom, and Richard was truthful by nature, so he replied, "I should like to be like Job, father, an' then I could ride harses."

John Baldock turned away in despair. What was to be done with a being so lost to the gravity of life as this? He gave up the large problem and seized on the small offence.

"What do you mean? Harses!" he exclaimed, irritably. "Don't you know better than that? Say 'horses.'"

Richard repeated the word obediently. "Don't let me hear you say 'harse' again," commanded his father. "It is not 'harse'; it is 'horse.' You may go now, and I shall not want you here to-morrow morning."

"Can I keep my bunny rabbit, father?" pleaded the small dismissed one. "I do love my rabbit."

His father was visited by a touch of compunction,

the first fruits of his workings of conscience. "You may keep your rabbit if you are good," he said.

The result of John Baldock's subsequent reflections was that the child was undoubtedly difficult to manage, and that he was in the right to correct him, severely if need be, but that it was quite possible—no, he would be honest—it was probable that he himself had been somewhat to blame in the matter of lessons. If so his offence had been purged from Richard's point of view by the rescinding of his punishment, and with regard to his own soul's health—an important point this, with John Baldock—by a resolve he made to take no further notice of Job's plain speaking. He would not have known where to find a substitute had he lost Job's services, but he ignored that fact. No great harm had been done, but the mistake—very well, then, if conscience insisted, the fault—should not occur again. There was something wrong in his method of laying the foundations of learning, however capable he had proved himself of building on to them when once laid. What was the solution? Ah, he had it. He would go and call the next day on Mrs. Meaking.

Mrs. Meaking was the widow of a former Beechurst schoolmaster, and lived in a pretty cottage in the village, supporting herself and her only child, a boy a few years older than Richard Baldock, by taking in needlework and keeping a small day school. This school was for the benefit of those children of the neighbourhood whose parents thought it more dignified to pay a small sum per week to have them indifferently taught by Mrs. Meaking than to permit them to receive a good education at the village school for nothing. Both the number of scholars and the sum paid for each of them was naturally small, for Beechurst con-

tained few inhabitants above the labouring class, and of those few the proportion of fools was not higher than the average; but with the help of the dressmaking, at which Mrs. Meaking was decidedly more competent than at imparting her small amount of knowledge, they helped her to make a living.

Mrs. Meaking had a passion for gentility, and was suspected of combining with it another secret passion which had the vicar for its object. She was a faded but sprightly woman, and was supported in her pretensions against the ill-disguised ridicule of her neighbours by unbreakable self-assurance.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Baldock," simpered Mrs. Meaking, genteelly, when the vicar called upon her in pursuance of his object. "Pray take a seat, and let me offer you a cup of tea."

"No, thank you," replied her visitor, "it is only three o'clock. I came to know if your occupations would permit you to come to the vicarage for an hour every day except Sunday, and teach my son to read and write and so on. For the first month an hour a day would be sufficient, but after that I should ask you to increase it to two."

Conflicting emotions tore Mrs. Meaking's soul in twain. An hour a day at the vicarage. An hour a day in Paradise! But another idea sprang full-fledged into her brain. If she could get the vicar's son to attend her school she would be a made woman. The scheme was too alluring to be rejected in favour of what would after all be an empty though sentimental delight. Her mind was made up by the time she was required to give an answer.

"I shall be very pleased to oblige you in the matter, Mr. Baldock," she replied, "but I fear that my duties

towards the young ladies and gentlemen who receive the benefits of my modest curriculum might make it difficult. But if you would consent——”

“I am aware that you teach the children of a few of the shopkeepers and farmers,” interrupted the vicar. “I think they would be better at the schools, but——”

“Oh, pardon me, Mr. Baldock,” interrupted Mrs. Meaking in her turn, “elementary studies they might pursue with advantage at the village school, but gentility, manners, behaviour—no! You could hardly expect it under present circumstances. In my husband’s time when I was at hand to——”

Neither would allow the other to lead the conversation. The vicar interrupted again. “I have no complaint to find with Mrs. Waller,” he said. “The children are well taught and kept in order. And the religious instruction is all that could be wished. I hope that you pay sufficient attention to that, Mrs. Meaking.”

“Oh, indeed, yes,” she replied. “The teaching of religion is almost a hobby with me. There is not one of my pupils who cannot say the Ten Commandments, both backwards *and* forwards, and everything else that the Church instructs us to teach the young they *are* taught, and taught thoroughly. But now, Mr. Baldock, if you will allow me to make a suggestion, why not let Master Baldock attend my modest seminary? I would take the utmost care that he should not be contaminated by the companionship of his inferiors in station. In fact, I would undertake to keep him in a class entirely apart, and I might even—a curtain——” She paused for a moment’s consideration.

“I should not want that,” said the vicar. “I have no objection to his mixing with the well-behaved chil-

dren of the village. In fact, now you put the idea into my head, I am not at all sure that the village school——”

“Oh, Mr. Baldock!” exclaimed Mrs. Meaking, aghast at this destructive acceptance of her suggestion, “surely you could never consider such an idea! The dirt and roughness of some of the village children is beyond belief. Indeed it is. I beg of you not to submit your child to it. Let *me* look after him. Let *me* bring him up in the way that he should go—I do not wish to be irreverent—and I give you my word that you will never regret it.”

“What children come here to be taught?” he asked.

“The little Worbys, a boy and a girl, the children of Mrs. Worby of Brook Farm—Mrs. Worby’s uncle was a surgeon; a son of Mr. Cutbush, Mr. Ventrey’s head—er—horticultural adviser; Mr. Bilberry’s son and daughter—the Bilberry of the Stores, not the rabbit-catcher—there is a relationship, I believe, but it is distant; the three children of Mr. Humby, the mail carrier, two boys and a girl, the son and daughter of Mrs. Orphan, who certainly does occasional domestic work, in your own establishment among others, I believe, but whose husband was in the sanitary engineering business, and my own son, Montague—eleven in all. Master Baldock would make the round dozen.”

“The children of a small farmer, a gardener, a grocer, a postman, a charwoman, widow of a plumber, and your own child,” commented the vicar, not with an idea of bringing Mrs. Meaking low, but merely for his own mental enlightenment; “as far as I know them all well-behaved children, and from respectable homes. No, I have no objection to Richard’s associating with

any of these, but I should wish to be consulted if you thought of taking any more pupils, Mrs. Meaking."

"I should not think of doing so, Mr. Baldock. Indeed, my apartment would unfortunately not permit of it at present, though I live in hopes of moving some day to better premises. I am quite ashamed to receive you in such a place as this. It is not what I have been accustomed to. My early home was very different, and even the school-house, although not entirely what I could wish, was——"

"Then I think we may consider the matter settled," said the vicar. "To-day is Saturday. Richard shall begin on Monday. I shall inquire from time to time as to his progress, and wish to be informed of any insubordination on his part, although I trust there may be none to report. As to terms, I will pay the same as the other parents. What are they?"

Mrs. Meaking told him, with a slightly lengthened face. They were not excessive, and the vicar, expressing himself satisfied, took his leave.

CHAPTER V

MRS. MEAKING'S SCHOOL

AND so Richard began his school life.

Mrs. Meaking's pupils sat at a long table in her general sitting-room, herself at the head. At the top of the class was Master Montague Meaking, a boy of eight, with a shock of stubborn hair and a very bright eye. He signalized the enrolment of a new pupil by putting out his tongue and screwing up his face into a shape expressive of disgust and contempt whenever he could do so unobserved by his mother. But he did it once too often, and was surprised by a box on the ear, delivered with great force, and a voluble outburst from Mrs. Meaking to which the whole class except himself disposed themselves to listen with obvious enjoyment.

Richard learnt, when he became a little older, that the monotony of lessons could be varied by giving Mrs. Meaking occasion for what was popularly known as a "jaw." There was some risk to the pupil who set her haranguing, but the bolder spirits were prepared to take it for the sake of the reward, and showed great ingenuity in providing her with subjects which should not recoil on themselves. Master Meaking was the leader in these excursions as in all others, but Richard himself later on disputed his supremacy where superior finesse was required.

On this occasion he sat open-mouthed while Mrs. Meaking held forth, to the accompaniment of melodious bellowings from her son. "To think," she cried, "that

a child of mine should be so wicked as to behave in that way to his superior in station. Have I not told you all times without number, that the clergy belong to the upper classes, and are to be treated with respect? And what applies to them applies to their offspring. Master Richard Baldock, I publicly apologize to you for my son's impertinence. In joining our little class—leave off at once, Montague, or I'll take the stick to you—you have conferred a distinction on us, and one which I will have every young lady and gentleman in this school aware of. And you especially, Montague—*will* you adone with your noise, now?—whose station in life is higher than that of your schoolfellows—no offence to Miss Worby's great-uncle—you who belong to the teaching or professional class—you ought to be specially ashamed of yourself. Very well, then, if you will *not* hold your noise, hold out your hand."

A painful scene followed which was as inexplicable to the five-year-old Richard as the previous harangue, for he had never been beaten himself and had no previous idea that he possessed any special precedence in the social scale, or indeed that there was such a thing as a social scale at all.

Knowledge of this sort, however, was not likely to be withheld from him for long under Mrs. Meaking's tuition. It formed, in fact, her chief stock in trade, and was drummed into her pupils at every turn. So much so, indeed, that she defeated her own object. Little Richard had not been many days going to and from Mrs. Meaking's cottage to his lessons before he discovered that to be a member of what she called her seminary meant the sustaining of untold insults at the hands of all the village children who did not enjoy that advantage. He and any other of

his small companions in misfortune who might be in his company were assailed with constant jeers and bodily assaults. "There go the little ladies and gentlemen," was the rallying cry of their tormentors; and they were seen at all unoccupied hours of the day scurrying here and there for safety. Their lives were a constant series of ambushes, skirmishes, and ignominious flights, for their numbers were small and the stamina of most of them insignificant. Montague Meaking might have created some diversions in favour of the persecuted party, for he was a sturdy rascal and ready with his fists, but he had shamelessly thrown in his lot with the aggressors, and no tongue was exercised with more scathing emphasis than his in pouring scorn and derision on the unfortunate children whose parents contributed to his mother's support and his own.

Richard and Master Montague Meaking, commonly known as Pug Meaking, in reference to a certain bluntness of facial conformation, were not altogether strangers to each other. Richard had once come across him on a predatory excursion in one of the overgrown shrubberies of the vicarage garden, and instead of announcing his presence to Job, who was working hard by, had welcomed him as a companion and shared ornithological secrets with him. The surreptitious visit had been repeated more than once, and the two children were by way of becoming cronies, Richard's inferiority of age being balanced by his forward intelligence. It therefore caused him considerable surprise, which lasted through the stirring hours of his first morning's lessons, to be received by his former friend in the way that has been described, and his surprise was not at all lessened when, school being over and he on his way home, he was overtaken by Master Montague Meaking,

who planted himself immediately in his path, protruded his face until it came within a few inches of that of the astonished Richard, and said in a tone of concentrated scorn, "Yah! Gentleman!"

Richard was too thunderstruck by this address to reply, but Samson Bilberry, a weedy boy of nine, in spectacles, who was of the party, spoke up for him.

"You better be careful, Pug Meaking," he gave warning. "We'll tell his farver an' you'll git someping you don't like."

"And who asked you to speak, Sam Bilberry?" inquired Master Meaking, truculently. "You're a gentleman yourself. Yah!"

"Well, an' ain't *you* a gentleman?" spoke up Miss Bilberry, tartly.

"No, never, I ain't," responded Master Meaking. "And I'll punch anyone's 'ead who says I am."

"You are! You are!" shouted the children in chorus, and Master Meaking darted into the group of them, arms and legs flying, and dealt promiscuous blows, one of which fell to Richard's share, who, more bewildered than hurt, began to cry.

"There, now you done it!" said Miss Bilberry. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, that you ought, a real little gentleman too. Never mind, Master Richard. You tell on him, dear, and he'll soon learn to leave you alone. Ah, well you *may* run, Pug Meaking. Gentleman yourself! There!"

The next moment Miss Bilberry was running herself as fast as she was able, for the village school hard by was pouring out its tale of urchins, and the roadway was no longer a safe place of congregation for the disciples of Mrs. Meaking.

It was not long before Richard's spirit was worked up to a definite conflict of will with Master Montague Meaking, whose daily insults had reached a high pitch of offensiveness. To do that young gentleman justice, the fact of his siding with the majority in the feud between the children of the village school and those taught with himself did not arise from cowardice, but from a genuine contempt of the standards applied by his mother. He loved the rough companionship of boy life, with its eager alliances, adventures, and conflicts, and could only find scope for his energies among the sturdy young rascals not under the influence of Mrs. Meaking's gentilities. He had fought his way against many odds in their company, and was fighting his way into leadership among them. Their standards were his, and he hated the sham code of manners by which his mother sought to temper the hardy roughness of the children under her charge. That his wholesome contempt for the code and the ambitions it instilled should have extended itself to the unfortunate beings who, like himself, were in subjection to it, need not surprise anyone who has any acquaintance with the habits of a boy's mind. Nevertheless, to little Richard, who was made of finer clay, there seemed something wrong in his attitude; and after he had suffered under Master Meaking's taunts for a few weeks, he embarked boldly on his first effort at getting at the bottom of things.

He was playing a solitary game of his own invention in the densities of the vicarage shrubbery, when he came upon his one-time friend, bent, as before, on a marauding expedition.

"Hullo," said Montague, amicably; "let's 'ave a game of Red Indians."

Richard stood squarely in front of him, his chubby

fists doubled up on his hips. "I don't want to play with you," he said. "You're not my friend."

"Oh, come on," replied Montague, milder than usual under his sense of trespass; "we'll have pax in here."

"No, we won't," said little Richard. "You're not my friend any more. You are always rude and rough to all of us."

"That's 'cos you're ladies and gentlemen," said Montague. "We needn't mind that here, because you're not a bad kid, and you can't help being a gentleman."

"But you are just the same as we are," said Richard. "I fink it's very mean to be just the same and to pretend you're not. If you wasn't bigger and stronger than us you couldn't do it."

"You're all little softies, Dickie Baldock. I like boys; I don't like softies."

"I like boys, too, Pug Meaking," replied little Richard, "an' I shall be as big as you some day. But I won't be rude and rough to little boys, 'specially when they can't help it. I fink it's mean."

"Don't you say I'm mean, Dickie Baldock."

"I fink you are, Pug Meaking; an' I shall say it if I want to."

"What's mean in me?"

"What I said. If you wasn't mean, you'd help us when the others run after us, 'stead of pretending you wasn't the same as us."

"If you don't say I'm not mean, Dickie Baldock, I'll give you a licking."

"No, you won't, Pug Meaking; you won't dare to."

"I suppose you'd holler out and sneak on me."

"I wouldn't sneak, but you wouldn't dare to touch me."

"Oh, wouldn't I?"

"No."

The usual deadlock in small boys' quarrels here occurred, when the blood of neither is heated up to the point of assault. Richard possessed the moral advantage, and presented it with a dauntless front. His adversary, influenced, we may hope, by a conviction that the charge brought against him was not entirely baseless, lowered his colours.

"Well, I ain't going to lick you now," he said, "'cos I believe you'd holler out. You're a sneak; and I don't want Job Wilding after me."

"No, I said you wouldn't dare," replied Richard. "Job's bigger and stronger than you. It's only little boys and girls you're not afraid of."

"If you say that I'll give you a licking straight," said Montague. "I've fought with lots of boys older and stronger than me, and licked them, too. And I ain't afraid of Job Wilding—not me!"

"Oh, you ain't, ain't you?" put in a gruff voice at his ear, as Job Wilding himself appeared from behind a thick laurel bush and dealt him a cuff which sent him spinning round with his elbow up to his ear and an injured expression on his countenance. "Now you just be off, you lousy young varmint; and if I catch you on these premises again I'll have you locked up. I've heard what you've been saying, and Master Richard's quite right. You're a cowardly young toad, for all your brag and bounce, and you may tell your mother I said so. You save your own bacon, an' turn round an' bully the young 'uns. You let me catch you a bullying of 'em again, an' I'll give you a hiding myself, and one you won't forget in a hurry. Now you just be off out o' this."

Master Meaking departed, and so far took to heart the criticism to which he had been subjected that he refrained thereafter from active methods of aggression against his small schoolfellows.

The rest of the village boys, however, continued to indulge in the pleasures of the chase whenever one of Mrs. Meaking's scholars came within their purview, until Richard, who, for all his growing self-reliance, was hardly yet out of babyhood, came home crying with a lump on his head produced by a thrown stone. Sarah attended to his wound with an accompaniment of scoldings, and then sallied forth to demand justice, scandalized at this breach in the sanctities attaching to the vicarage. She first visited Mrs. Meaking, who could hardly be said to be responsible for the outrage, but with whom she had for some time been spoiling for an outspoken conversation, considering that she gave herself intolerable airs, though no better than other people.

Mrs. Meaking's cottage was one of the prettiest in the village. It was half-timbered, and little dormer windows peeped out from under thatch shaded by the branches of a great elm. You went through a wicket-gate and up a steep path bordered with phloxes, mallows, and hollyhocks, and you walked through a little porch, over which ramped a white rose of the kind known as "the Seven Sisters," and straight into the sitting-room. This was long and low, and oak-raftered. It had a latticed window and a generous hearth, with a high overmantel, bordered by a chintz hanging. Here fitness ended, for Mrs. Meaking had furnished her room with the cheap monstrosities belonging to her age, and had dealt with her apartment as far as possible as if it were the parlour of a small villa. She

was accustomed to bemoan her fate in having been forced to leave the Cockney brick-built slate-roofed school-house, with its two mean little bow-windowed parlours and its narrow passage-way. It was commonly said to have been a greater grief to her to give up her drawing-room, her dining-room, and her hall than to lose her husband. She certainly bemoaned the loss of the one more frequently than that of the other.

Old Sarah, in close-fitting black bonnet, beaded Spencer and voluminous skirts, her mouth set firmly, marched up the flagged path and knocked at the door with her umbrella. It was opened by Mrs. Meaking, who was exercising her secondary occupation of dress-maker and held the implements of that occupation, some in her hand and some in her mouth. Her face assumed its mincing expression when she recognized the visitor. "Oh, pray step in, Mrs. Wellbeloved," she said. "I am afraid you will find the room rather untidy, but with this wretched little place I am unable to keep a room into which to hand callers."

"Don't name it, ma'am," said Sarah. "I am only a servant and am not accustomed to such. I keep my place and should wish that others were as ready to do the same, instead of aping the ways of their betters."

Mrs. Meaking accepted battle at once. She was quite accustomed to having her pretensions made the subject of remark to her face, and was ready to defend them at all times.

"Meaning me, I suppose, ma'am," she said sharply, standing in front of her visitor and preventing her coming farther into the room. "But I'll have you to know that if you are a servant I am not a servant, and never was a servant, but on the contrary was brought

up where servants were kept, and never obliged to do a hand's turn, and kept them myself in days more fortunate, as you very well know."

"A chit from the village at two pun ten a year and her victuals, and not much of 'em," retorted Sarah. "But it don't signify. May I ask whether it is the habit in genteel circles to keep a visitor standing in the door and not dust a seat for her?"

"The seats in my room, poor as it is, don't want dusting, ma'am," said Mrs. Meaking, quivering. "If you come to pay me a friendly call you'll be asked in and made welcome. When you come to make yourself unpleasant you can stand in the door and say what you've got to say, or take yourself off the way you came, whichever you please."

"I've come to say this, ma'am," spoke up old Sarah. "Little Master Richard has come home with a lump on his head as big as a small potato. He never did ought, in my opinion, to have been sent here to get a pack of rubbish put into his head, but my opinion wasn't asked——"

"No, and not likely to be," interpolated Mrs. Meaking.

"That's as may be, ma'am, though my opinion is worth more than that of some who'd give their ears for it to be asked of them in quarters that shall be nameless. But if you haven't got sense to put inside the child's head which is well beknown, it's your duty to see that the outside ain't damaged, and if you can't do it I'll acquaint the child's pa, and we'll see what'll happen."

"And do you mean to insinuate, ma'am, that it was me who hurt the child's head?"

"I mean to say, ma'am, that the child has been hurt

and might have been killed. He's under your care at such times as he is not at home under mine, and it's your place to stop such goings on."

"And how can I stop it? Well known it is to you, Sarah Wellbeloved, that the rough boys and girls of this village, not having anybody to teach them manners nowadays, make a practice, to which they are encouraged by those who ought to know better, of persecuting the children whose parents wish them to be brought up with gentility, and send them to my school with that object."

"Gentility," sniffed Sarah. "Airs you mean, I suppose."

"No, ma'am, I do not mean airs. I mean what I say; I say gentility, and I mean gentility. It is gentility that is persecuted in this village, because people are so ignorant that they look down upon it. I wish I could have some of them in Hackney, where I was brought up. Their rough manners wouldn't carry them very far there, I can tell you, and they would soon find the difference between their station and mine."

"You're so full up of your station, ma'am," replied Sarah, "that you haven't got time to think of other people's. Master Richard is as much above you as you think yourself above others. You ought to be proud to be allowed to have the vicar's son coming here instead of your being had up to the vicarage and told to wait in the hall till the breakfast's cleared away and there's a table for you. And here's the child made a scapegrace of all on account of your pack of sham genteel whippersnappers what 'ud be treated peaceful and same as ordinary if it wasn't for the rubbish they're taught here. I beg to acquaint you, ma'am, that I shall not let the matter drop here. If I can't get satis-

faction out of you, I shall go elsewhere, and we shall see what we shall see."

Mrs. Meaking saw her way. "You are quite right to lodge a complaint with me, Miss Wellbeloved," she said loftily, "for I believe you have no right to the title of Mrs.—though your behaviour in doing so is most unbecoming in a servant towards a lady. I shall complain to the proper quarters myself, and if you are going back to the Vicarage I shall be obliged if you will kindly tell your master that I am coming to call on him in about half an hour's time."

"It'll take you that to curl up your best fringe," chuckled old Sarah, not at all put out by the rebuke. "I should make it an hour if I was you, and you can sit in the kitchen till the master's ready for you." And with that she turned a meagre black back on Mrs. Meaking, and pattered down the garden path, very well satisfied with herself.

A visit to the mother of the boy who she thought was the most likely to have thrown the stone produced results as satisfactory. She got a cup of tea and a good gossip, during which she retailed to the delight of herself and her hearer the particulars of her late conversation with Mrs. Meaking, and not the slightest reluctance was shown to give full credit to her accusation. The supposed culprit, who could have proved a satisfactory alibi if he had been allowed to call up his witnesses, was dealt with in a thoroughly drastic manner in her presence, and if she had not done little Richard much good by her advocacy she had spent a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon, and went back to her household duties at the Vicarage in high good humour.

Here Mrs. Meaking had preceded her, and, putting a genuine grievance with more than her customary direct-

ness, had received promises of redress. The vicar visited the village school the next morning and announced such pains and penalties if the persecution of Mrs. Meaking's pupils was continued as to create no small effect. And the schoolmaster backed him up, so that after a few dwindling alarums and excursions the feud died down and did not break out again until a few years later, when Mrs. Meaking decided to put the boys of her school into mortar boards. Then there was trouble, but it no longer affected Richard Baldock.

CHAPTER VI

RICHES INNUMERABLE

It will have been gathered from what has already been said that John Baldock's household was established on no very generous scale. He was indeed a poor man, having no income outside the rather meagre stipend attached to his cure and the few guineas he occasionally earned by his pen. Food, clothing, warmth and shelter there was, and little besides, but in the ample surroundings of his home Richard never felt the want of more, or, if he thought about it at all, considered himself rather rich and important in comparison with the village boys who were his chief companions. Nevertheless, there grew up within him a conviction that his life was to be somehow different from that of his father. Sarah, who for a saint so firmly convinced of her future beatitude was singularly alive to the advantages of temporal wealth, when she unbent so far as to discuss his probable future with him, always took it for granted that he would be a rich man, a very rich man. These discussions were not of course carried on, on the plane of actualities. No small boy considers his future career otherwise than as an opportunity for boundless play, or his occupation in life other than as something to be done with his hands in connection with animals or machinery or tools of some sort. It was on the possibilities of infinite self-indulgence in the matter of houses and servants and horses and carriages that Sarah loved to dwell, whenever the advantage of a

carpenter's career over that of a coachman or an engine-driver, or some such problem, was exercising Richard's brain. She would bring in a few observations touching on the responsibilities of extreme wealth towards the poor, for convention's sake, but her mind dwelt chiefly on the capabilities of limitless riches for providing an uncomfortable amount of state, and she would expatiate on this subject at great length, only bringing her golden imaginings down to earth again when Richard entered into them with some plan of his own. Then she would rebuke him for arrogance, and remind him that riches came only as a reward for virtue, in which commodity he was singularly lacking.

And yet the result of her imaginative excursions was to leave him with the impression that great riches would certainly be within his grasp in that distant time when he would be grown up. Job would also add something to the impression by supposing that when Master Richard was full of money he wouldn't be able to find a comfortable little crib with a cow and a few pigs and a pony and a bit of garden for an old man who had provided strawberries and apples for him in early youth and had come in the course of years to be past work; or that there wouldn't likely be room for a withered old man among all the flunkeys who'd sit down to a good dinner of beef and beer in the servants' hall, every day in the week and every week in the year. Richard, of course, promised comforts innumerable for the declining years of his childhood's friend, and never doubted but that he would be in a position to supply them.

Then there was Mrs. Meaking. Mrs. Meaking also had proposals to put forward contingent on great wealth to be possessed by Richard, and a somewhat

exaggerated gratitude on his part towards herself for services rendered to him in youth. Mrs. Meaking was to be accommodated with a genteel residence with a portico door and steps leading up to it, where she was to be waited on by two maids. She was to have a neat pony carriage and a groom-gardener in livery, and her expectations apparently included a permanent claim on her patron's liberality whenever ladies of title should be entertained at his hospitable board. "For," said Mrs. Meaking, "I should have an evening dress of rich black silk with lace and a cameo brooch, and should not disgrace *any* table either in dress or manners."

Richard fell in amicably with all these various suggestions and even amended them for the benefit of his would-be pensioners, and in spite of his preference for the more humble career of bell-ringer and sexton, or general carrier, or in more expansive moments for that of "agister" in the forest, acquired the impression that the line of life marked out for him was that of luxurious independence.

It was not until he reached the age of ten that any light was thrown on the subject by his father. The future then opened itself out to him in a way to set him casting forward. He had borrowed "Tom Brown's Schooldays" from the village library, and had been fascinated with the picture shown in that book of the common life of work and play led by boys not much older than himself. Life at a public school, or, rather, life at Rugby—for he scarcely knew the names of any others—seemed to him the only life worth leading, and he trembled with desire to possess it, only to be saddened by the thought that it was not for him, for the status of Squire Brown had taken hold of his imagination as an exalted one, and that of his own father

seemed far beneath it. Then the impression of his own future as somewhat exalted, too, came to encourage him with a hope that it might even include such delights as those he had been reading of, and he determined to put a question to his father.

This was a rather daring undertaking, for John Baldock did not welcome questions unless they had some bearing on religious matters, when they were taken as possible indications of the striving of the Spirit. With the guile bred in the most transparent child's nature by constant association with unnatural standards of life, Richard would sometimes seek to bend his father's mind toward amiability by affecting an interest in things he cared as little about as most children, using words and glib expressions which had a meaning to those from whom he heard them, although none to him. He did so on this occasion, putting a profound question about the universality of grace, which had cost him much anxious mental preparation and had already been experimentally propounded to Sarah, who had waded far out of her depth in endeavouring to fish up an answer to it. It was so far successful in that it did not bring down upon him a stern rebuke for the light handling of holy things, and the vicar answered it gravely and categorically, leaving Richard at leisure to project his mind in a pleasant wandering among the cloud-buildings of an imaginary Rugby Close. When the subject had been discussed a little further, Richard being very careful not to dissipate the good impression he had made by venturing on to ground he had not sufficiently explored, his father said:—

“I am glad you have opened up your heart to me on these matters, Richard. It is my only wish for

you that you should regard them as all-important. Hitherto I have seen little in you but lightness and frivolity, and I own that I had begun to fear that it was not God's will that you should come to a knowledge of Him whose awful vengeance you are so heedlessly laying up for yourself." (This to a child of ten years old of the Being who had given him life!) "I now have a faint hope that this may not be so, and that you may yet undergo that complete change of heart without which all earthly prosperity is dust and ashes."

It appeared that Richard had learned his lesson too well, and he was somewhat ashamed of his success, for he was not a hypocrite at heart, and had a tender conscience, though his father would have been surprised to hear it. He became, moreover, a little anxious as to whether he possessed enough skill to turn the conversation from these deep channels towards an inquiry directed to so mundane an object as a school career. But to his surprise his father continued:—

"Your attitude encourages me to allude to something I should not otherwise have touched on at present, although the time is coming when something must be said. You are perhaps aware, Richard, that I am a poor man—a very poor man as far as worldly goods are concerned, although rich beyond counting in the treasure that is incorruptible. I could not even afford to give you the education I had myself, nor do anything towards what would be called starting you in life. I could only go on teaching you myself, as I am doing to the best of my ability now, and place you in some occupation which demanded neither money nor an expensive education for entrance. It is true that you could serve God in whatever position in life you might be placed, and the majority of your fellow creatures

would still not be so well off in their upbringing as yourself. But I believe it to be the duty of a parent, however little store he may set upon worldly advancement, not to reject it for his children if it appears to be the will of God that it should come to them; and, as far as you are concerned, the wealth that has not been granted to me will be provided for you from another quarter."

This might have been interesting to Richard if he had been ten or fifteen years older; but he had no wish at that time to possess the sort of wealth that is spoken of as his father was speaking of it then. A silver coin, however small, presented to him with pleasing suddenness, would have caused him great delight, but he was old enough to know that, however much money was to be provided for him in the future, it would be from quite a different mint from that in which were coined the occasional coppers he knew so well how to deal with in the present. His father's information had so far left him cold, but he listened with eagerness for an improbable mention of the word school, which he had not as yet, in his youthful inexperience, connected with the word education. His father went on:—

"You know, I suppose, that your Aunt Henrietta, who is also your godmother, has taken a great interest in you ever since your birth?"

Richard assented, but the statement was news to him. He had never set conscious eyes on his Aunt Henrietta, and she, so far as he knew, had never taken the smallest trouble to become acquainted with him. She had, it is true, presented him at his christening with a heavy silver mug, which had been described to him by Sarah, but which he had actually never seen. She had followed this up a few years later with an

expensively bound Bible and Prayer Book, which his father had also impounded—not so much, probably, because he thought they were too good to use, as on account of the silver cross which formed part of the decoration of both—a symbol upon which John Baldock looked with profound suspicion. Sometimes too, although not invariably at Christmas, or about the date of his birthday, his father would show him a piece of crackly white paper, with the curt announcement, “This is for you from your Aunt Henrietta”; when he would put it away with no further words said, leaving Richard with the conviction that if his Aunt Henrietta could not do better than that as a dispenser of gifts she must be a singularly mean and unimaginative person. In fact, in spite of her spasmodic calling to remembrance of his existence, Richard’s Aunt Henrietta had not hitherto been the means of providing him with a single moment of pleasure, or, indeed, of interest in her, and he was consequently not a little surprised to hear of the interest she was now alleged to have taken in him.

Also a little incredulous; but his incredulity was immediately swept away by his father’s next statement, which was to the effect that when he was of a proper age he was to be sent to a public school at her expense, and after that to the University. The University meant nothing to him, and he did not even connect it with Oxford or Cambridge, whose inhabitants he believed to have no other purpose in life than to row boat-races, dressed in dark blue and light blue respectively. But his delight may be imagined when he learnt that the school selected for him was none other than the paradise of his late dreams, and that he was to be sent there in about three years’ time.

Well, if his Aunt Henrietta had it in her power to bring about such miracles as these, it struck Richard that she might be a person worth learning something about, although he had not hitherto suspected it. His father having completed a short excursus on the temptations of school and college life, and dismissed him, he sought out Sarah, whom he found engaged in "counting the wash." As she was quite unapproachable on such an occasion, he left her with "one, two, three p'r of ——," and went into the garden. Here he discovered Job pruning a young apple tree, and not disinclined for conversation.

"Job," he said. "Do you know what my Aunt Henrietta is going to do for me?"

"Do for 'ee?" replied Job. "No, that I don't. But whatever it be I reckon it won't bring her to poverty a day sooner."

Richard was too excited to endeavour to disengage the meaning underlying this utterance. "She's going to send me to school," he said, "to Rugby. Have you ever heard of Rugby, Job?"

"Have I ever heerd of Rugby?" echoed Job, who obviously had not. "Ah, you may well ask. And that's where she's agoing for to send 'ee?"

"Yes," said Richard. "And she has taken an interest in me ever since I was born."

"Have she now?" replied Job in his most interested manner. "We live from year to year and rise up and lay down, and what we don't know to-day we shall learn to-morrow."

"Have you ever seen my Aunt Henrietta, Job?"

"She came to this house of mirth and gladness once in my experience. She didn't come again. The religious dooties was too light. It didn't soot 'er."

"Is she a very religious woman, then?" inquired Richard.

"Religious?" repeated Job. "There's a question."

"How old is my Aunt Henrietta? When did she come here? How long did she stop? What is she like? Did she talk to you much?"

Job stooped down to pick up the shoots he had cut off, put them into his garden basket, and walked on to the next tree. He acted with extreme deliberation and an unmistakable air of offence. Richard selected one from his batch of questions and offered it again in the form of an observation.

"I expect she would like to come out in the garden and talk to you." The tightness of Job's lips relaxed, and he settled once more to speech.

"The giddiness of converse in the house lyin' sometimes heavy on her conscience, it is the truth that she did refresh herself occasional by sensible talk along o' me. There is one what ornaments the upstairs floors inside she might 'a spoke with, but the amazement of it was she didn't take kindly to the party alluded to. A dratted old fool was the observation made at the time, or as near as I can get to the language of palaces. There must have been a mistake somewhere, for it is well beknown that the party in question is wonderful wise and bound straight for a higher place. So she do say herself, and who should know better."

"What did you talk about?" asked Richard, anxious that the conversation should not be shunted on to the side track of a diatribe against Sarah, entertaining as he knew that subject could be made under Job's manipulation.

"Our converse was varied. It was carried on with a view to improving ourselves. I was asked questions.

Anyone might think *you* was fairly up to the mark in putting queries. But, bless you, where you'd dig up a spadeful, she'd fill a barrow. Sometimes I was permitted to answer one. More gen'ly I'd only got to say nothink, and hear 'er answerin' of 'em 'erself. Oh, we was wonderful good friends. You might 'a thought we'd growed on the same tree all our lives."

"I expect she liked you, Job," said Richard, diplomatically, "or she wouldn't have wanted to come and talk to you so much."

"Like me! I tell you, don't I? We might 'a bin a couple of hob cherries growed on the same stalk. I was a character, she said. There's somethink it don't fall to the lot of every man to be told about 'imself. And I don't ask nothing extra in wages for it, neither. She could stand for hours hearing me talk. So she said, and I dessay she could 'ave if she'd ever come to the end of what she 'ad to say herself. But I goes to bed at half-past eight reg'lar, and she seldom come out before four o'clock in the arternoon. Why, I was to give notice here, and go and be her head-gardener where she lives, at wages what a lord might envy, and a cottage an' lights an' coals an' garden produce an' all, same as the fine gentleman up at the Manor, only better, and my holding was to be bought for golden money, and put in the bank. Bless you, we fixed it up most amiable. She was going to write to me the moment she got back 'ome."

"And did she?" asked Richard, innocently.

Job turned on him. "Now look 'ere, Master Richard," he said in quite a different tone. "If you think I got nothing better to do than to stand 'ere with my 'ands in my pockets and answer a pack of nonsensical questions aimed at me as if I was a Aunt Sally at a

fair, you're mistook. Just you turn round an' show me the patch on the back of your breeches, and walk off without no more ado."

There was no patch on the garments mentioned, but this was one of Job's figures of speech, and Richard took it without offence and removed himself to another part of the garden. He had something to think about. There seemed to be a hint of unreliability in his Aunt Henrietta according to Job's experience of her, and an unpleasant thought assailed him, that it would be very terrible if he were to hear nothing more about the schemes for his welfare than he gathered Job had heard about those proposed for him. But the thought did not trouble him long. His father had stood sponsor for her in the matter and that made it a certainty.

Richard's appetite was now whetted by what he had heard from Job, for further news about his Aunt Henrietta. He lay in wait for an amiable mood on the part of Sarah, confirmed it by the small arts he was accustomed to practise on her, and led her into a discussion on the situation. She was at her needlework, seated at the table underneath the window of the nursery, and Richard was in a chair by the fire with a book on his knee and exercising a strong control over himself not to kick the high fender, a misdemeanour to which his youthful restlessness rendered him liable and which on this occasion might disastrously have stopped the flow of Sarah's tongue.

"Ah!" she said, holding up her needle to the light and, after poking her thread once or twice into circumambient space, fitting it home through the eye, "it's a great thing is schooling, though it won't make up for a stony heart, and them as are without it can partake of grace full and free, thanks be. Never you

forget that, Master Richard, and remember as a proud look and a high stomach is not acceptable and temptations to such sent to resist."

This small dose of powder having been administered the jam followed in the shape of much interesting light thrown upon Aunt Henrietta's character and appearance, for Sarah was fond of a gossip and when thoroughly set only interrupted herself occasionally to bring her conversation into line with her sense of religious propriety. She also cleared up the situation somewhat with regard to Richard's expectations, of which she had given many a previous hint, as has been explained.

"Pray, don't think," she said, "that this is the first I've heard of the schooling and what's to come after, though my place to acquaint you before you'd heard it otherwise it was not. You must know that your aunt only came here once when yer poor dear mother was exp—— leastways when you was born. Being rich beyond the dreams of average, the Christian simplicity of the 'ome was not what she'd bin accustomed to, and I'm not saying but what there was some words between us, nor that I was used to being spoke to as if I was dirt and didn't know my duties, which albeit is a thing known as well as I do. But we're told to forgive, and forgive I have and make excuses too, for them as is high in the world has no cause to hide their feelings and opinions same as the lowly, and it will all be made up by and by."

"Is my aunt very high in the world?" asked Richard.

"Riches innumerable," replied Sarah, "and horses and carriages and building barns in plenty, but apt to forget that this night shall her soul be required of

thee, and neither chick nor child of 'er own to leave it to 'cept her only sister's what she loved with a love surpassing the love of women."

"My mother was her only sister, wasn't she?" asked Richard.

"I heard myself," pursued Sarah, without replying directly to the question, "the arrangements made when she acquainted yer father with what her intentions was. It was after the funeral—but there, I never have and never will 'old conversation with you about those sorrowful days, you being a weak infant and dependent on me for bringing up, which well I knew what was required of me though told otherwise to my face. I had occasion to pass the dining-room door, and though listening to words not meant for my ears is what I'd never stoop to, being sensibly converted an' settin' loose to idle vanities, part of the conversation obtruded itself on me. 'Mind, I make myself responsible for the child, John,' she was saying. 'He's all I have in the next generation,' she says, 'an' for the sake of 'er who's gone he shall come after me same as if he was my own. You and me knows each other now,' she says—she was one to speak her mind straight out—'an' we're not likely to get on together, an' needn't see more of one another nor we can help. But the boy shall go to school an' college,' she says, 'and when I die, which I don't intend to, not for many years yet'—forgetting that immortality is not conferred along o' this world's goods, but we brought nothing into this world and the same we shall carry out—'when I die,' she says, 'he shall inherit the earth,' as it might be. Soon after that she left, and took her traypsin' overdressed hussy of a maid, with all the airs of Jezebel and not much better in character as I'll be bound,

along with her. The pleasures of the world drew her. Our feet was too firm set on the heavenly road for her to keep us company, for them as is blessed with riches is apt to take life light, not thinking but what things'll be the same to all eternity, instead of hell fire as their everlasting portion."

"Then wasn't she good?" asked Richard, innocently.

"Good," repeated Sarah. "How you do talk to be sure! Who said she wasn't good? I hope I know my place better, Christian though I be, to say any such thing of a lady in her station. And haven't you learnt by this time that being good won't save you from hell fire? If you haven't you had ought, that's all I can say."

This curious theological paradox had been dinned into Richard with some insistence, though the way of stating it was Sarah's own. "She wasn't saved then?" he amended his question.

"Drat the child!" exclaimed Sarah impatiently. "Haven't you heard me say 'Judge not, that ye be not judged,' times without number?"

"But you judge me," retorted Richard. "You say often enough that I am not saved."

"No more you ain't," replied Sarah tartly, "and won't be if you go on the way you're going now."

The way he was going seemed at any rate unlikely to lead to further disclosures from Sarah, and Richard relinquished the subject for the present, but turned over in his mind what he had heard as he sat by the fire with "Tom Brown's Schooldays" on his knee, mixing up in his dreams of the places and characters dealt with in those pages the figure of his aunt and her apparent inconsistencies.

CHAPTER VII

RICHARD PAYS A VISIT

PARADINE PARK, the seat of the late Joseph Moggeridge, Esq. (J.P., D.L., in his leisure hours, and railway contractor in his more strenuous moments), and now in the uncontrolled possession of his widow, was situated within fifteen miles of the Bank of England, and its lodge gates within three of the town of Sandley. Sandley, of which Mr. Moggeridge had been thrice mayor in his earlier days when he was already a rich man but had not yet attained the golden dreams of his youth or the delights of landed possessions, was so conveniently placed with regard to London that the great city had stretched out greedy tentacles of brick and slate and pavement towards it and was gradually drawing it into the ring of its outer suburbs. But Paradine Park itself was in beautiful and as yet untouched country, and Mr. Moggeridge had been able to play the landed proprietor every morning and evening, on Sundays and sometimes on Saturdays, and, with the loss of only three quarters of an hour spent in travelling twice a day, carry on his great business operations in the city of London during the rest of his time.

Mr. Moggeridge had been wont to expatiate on the rural remoteness which he enjoyed when he had cast off for the day or for the week the cares of his business operations, but to Richard Baldock, rolling along in state in his aunt's barouche behind a pair of high stepping bays, with the blue backs of a coachman and a

footman high above and in front of him, the country which he was passing through appeared quite shamefully sullied and unworthy of the name of country at all. There were lamp-posts and kerbstones, trim hedges and villa walls. The din of London, which he had lately passed through for the first time in his life, still rang in his ears, attuned to the great silences of the forest, and could by no means be shaken off in these frequented roads, smugly aping the ways of country lanes, as the late Mr. Moggeridge, in broadcloth and thin-soled boots, had aped the ways of a country gentleman after business hours.

Richard was now thirteen years of age. A communication, more in the nature of a peremptory summons than an invitation, had reached Beechurst Vicarage two days before, in consequence of which he had been sent off to make the acquaintance of his aunt and godmother, who was to do so much for him in the future, but had done so little in the past that he may be forgiven for feeling no small qualms of uncertainty as to his coming reception. Already, his unaccustomed position was breeding uneasiness, and, country-bred mouse as he was, his thoughts were homing back to the quiet amplitude of the forest which had grown to be part of his life.

But after a three-mile drive along roads half suburb and half country, the carriage drew up at a little rustic lodge standing among pines and beeches, and an unpretentious gate opening into a sandy road. The gate was unlocked to admit it, and instantly the disturbance of spirit cast by the shadow of town and crowd was changed into the contentment of nature in which the boy had been nurtured. The carriage rolled between high banks of rhododendron down into a hollow and up

again, past a pond, guarded by white posts, on which an angry swan was sailing, protecting his lady, who was hatching her eggs somewhere out of sight under the bushes. It was springtime, and the larches were showing tassels of vivid green against the dark background of pines, and here and there an early rhododendron was a blaze of colour. They came out by and by into the open, and the horses trotted up a gentle rise between undulating stretches of green sward where the rabbits were feeding. They drove for nearly a mile and at last reached the top of a hill crowned by a clump of tall beeches towards which the wood-pigeons were swinging home to roost. The road dropped sharply again, and at the foot of the hill, still at some distance, could be seen a large plain house of white stone, fronting a broad gravel sweep and the grassy rise beyond it. On the farther side of the long line of roof the hills rose again in field and woodland, and at their foot lay the village, with the red roof and square tower of its church and groups of cottage chimneys showing among the trees. Mr. Moggeridge had been justified in his choice of a country house. None within such easy reach of London and business could have been more pleasantly situated.

The carriage drew up in front of the hall door, and with the assistance of the footman from the box, a butler, and another footman who appeared from within the house, Richard was extracted from the carriage and introduced into a large square hall, where he stood, a small shy figure in rough country-made clothes, his cap in his hand, wondering what in the world he was to do next.

There appeared from one of the many doors opening out of the hall another boy, a year or so older than

himself and a good deal taller. He was a good-looking boy, dark as to eyes, hair, and skin, and carried himself with an easy self-assurance, as if he were quite aware of his good looks and rather expected them to be noticed. He was very well dressed, and altogether showed as great a contrast to Richard in appearance and manner as it would have been possible to find.

"Hullo, Baldock," he said, coming forward to shake hands. "I'm Laurence Syde. I'm staying here with my father. Mrs. Moggeridge has gone up to rest or something. She asked me to look after you. Tea's ready. Would you like to go and wash your hands or will you come and have your grub now?"

Richard selected the latter alternative, and Laurence led him into a large pleasant room facing the gardens on the other side of the house, where a repast that would have been called sumptuous by a novelist of the period—and not without reason—was spread out on a round table.

"Jolly room, this," said Laurence. "You and I are to have it to ourselves to do what we like in, and we'll have some good larks here. Hullo! stale bread again! I'm not going to stand it." He went up to the fireplace and rang the bell. "John is the name of the fellow who is to look after you and me," he said. "Don't you stand any nonsense from him; it never does with servants—they get careless. Look here!" (this to a footman who had entered the room), "what's the meaning of this? I told you I wouldn't have stale bread yesterday. Take this away and bring another loaf."

"There's no new bread in the house, sir," said John.

"Oh, nonsense! That's what you said yesterday.

You just go and find some, and don't come back without it."

The footman left the room with the condemned loaf to inform the cook that "young me lord was at his antics again," but to return with a fresh loaf as new and indigestible as could be desired. Laurence kept up an easy flow of conversation as he poured out tea, carved a chicken as cleverly as if he had been a surgeon, and played the host with great tact and assurance. Richard, gradually coming into possession of his scattered senses, felt his spirits rising. This was a delightful companion; and surely a house that afforded promise of great entertainment, where everything was conducted on such a scale of luxury and profusion. The forest and the shabby vicarage began to retire into the background of his consciousness.

"There's a pony each for us," said Laurence, "and a jolly little cart. I should have driven in to meet you, only the carriage was taking my father to the station, and I thought we might have the ponies for a ride after tea. Can you ride, by the bye?"

"Yes," said Richard; "I ride a lot at home."

The older boy, leaning back easily in his chair, his hospitable labours over, allowed himself a critical examination of his companion. His eyes were cold, but the affability of his manner underwent no change.

"Got a pony?" he asked.

"Yes; I've got two," answered Richard.

Laurence's eyes expressed interest, perhaps a shade of incredulity. "How many horses has your father got in his stable?" he asked.

"Oh, there's only one old forest pony," said Richard, "and she's generally turned out. And so are mine.

They're very rough, but one of them won't be bad when I've finished breaking him."

"Can you break ponies?"

"Yes; I do it a good deal. That's how I got these two colts—breaking ponies in for other people. They thought they weren't worth much and let me have them; but I think one of them won't be bad."

"We'll see how you get on with these here. One of them's rather a little devil. Grant, the coachman, wanted me to ride the other, but I wouldn't have it. I took him out—his name's Ginger—and gave him a walloping. He nearly had me off two or three times, but I managed to stick on; and I tell you I gave him snuff. Now I've shown him I'm his master I don't mind taking the other this evening, and you can see what you can make of him. Come on, let's go and change. I told them to be ready at a quarter to six, and it's half-past five now. Your room's next to mine. I'll show you. I expect John has put out your things; if not, we'll ring and make him."

Laurence led the way upstairs. Richard followed him, at a loss how to explain that his only riding clothes were those in which he also walked and sat and pursued the various avocations of a day which began at five or six o'clock in the morning, or even earlier, and ended at about nine, without any change of costume.

"I've got a pair of gaiters," he said, diffidently, "but I didn't bring them."

"What a pity! Didn't you bring any breeches, either?"

"No."

"I could have lent you a pair of gaiters. I'm going to wear boots. But you wouldn't like to wear

them with trousers; they look so beastly. You'll have to ride as you are, and you can send for your things to-morrow. In fact, we'll ride to the post office and send a telegram. Come into my room while I change."

Richard followed him into a spacious bedroom and seated himself in a chair by the window while his new friend completed an elaborate toilet, which included cord breeches, high boots of patent leather and silver-plated spurs, talking all the time; while Richard, not called upon to take any very important part in the conversation, looked on with amazement, wondering in his simple mind that such things could be.

"Now I'm ready," said the young dandy at last, drawing on a pair of neat dogskin gloves. "Come on."

Richard felt a kind of shame such as he had never before experienced and could not analyse; but something warned him that it was not a feeling to be encouraged. He mentally gave himself a little shake.

"Got your gloves?" inquired Laurence as they went down the broad staircase.

"I haven't got any gloves," replied Richard, promptly; "and it's no good riding to a post office to telegraph for my riding clothes, because I haven't got any. I don't mind what clothes I ride in."

The other boy stared at him. Richard met his look, and for an instant they measured one another.

"Well, I like to look like a gentleman, whatever I'm doing," said Laurence.

"I don't suppose it will make much difference to the ponies," replied Richard.

A chestnut pony and a black one rather tall were being led up and down the drive in front of the hall door.

“Norah for me to-day,” said Laurence to the groom. “This gentleman is going to ride Ginger—if he can” (this under his breath). “You’d better take his stirrups in a couple of holes and let mine out.”

Richard was making friends with the black pony.

“What a little beauty!” he said. “I’ve never ridden a pony like this before.”

Laurence’s lip took on the least little curve. “You can have the chestnut if you like,” he said; “she’s quieter.”

“No, thank you,” said Richard. “You said I could have this one.”

“Oh, you can if you like, but he’ll probably kick you off. He wouldn’t try it on with me again. I’ve got the better of him.”

They mounted and rode off up the hill on the grass, Laurence spurring his pony to a wild gallop regardless of rabbit-holes, Richard holding his in hand, not without great difficulty. The groom looked after him from under his hand.

“That’s a pretty way to treat horseflesh,” he said to John, who was standing at the door. “He’s got no more idea of what he’s up to than a circus-rider.”

“’E don’t ’alf brag, neither, do ’e?” said John, relapsing for the moment into his native vernacular. “’E was full up of ’ow ’e’d lathered ’is pony when ’e came back yesterday.”

“It’s either their own neck or the ’orse’s spirit that’s broke with that sort,” said the groom. “’Oo’s the little ’un? It ain’t the first time he’s been on a pony’s back.”

“The missus’s nephew,” replied John. “’E’ll come after ’er, so they say.”

The groom laughed a sardonic laugh, and went back

to the stable-yard. "They're blamed clever," he threw over his shoulder.

Laurence pulled up his pony under the beeches at the top of the rise and turned around. Richard was coming up to him, leaning well back, trying with all his might to get control over his excited mount.

"Why did you go off like that?" he spoke up when he had reached the top, still hard at work with his fretting pony. He was a different creature from the shy boy of the last half-hour sitting silent under the weight of his companion's assumptions. Even Laurence's unaccustomed eye admitted his horsemanship.

"Just to give them a breather," he said, half apologetically.

"A breather," echoed Richard, scornfully. "I've never seen anybody ride like that, except once on the sands at Brigmouth on a hired screw."

Laurence's face flushed; but true to the code of boyhood, he took second place under obvious superiority, and learnt more as to the proper handling of ponies during the rest of the evening's ride than he had ever known before. Richard was in his element. His diffidence had vanished; he was leader for the time being, and held the advantage he had gained quite naturally. "You ought to ride very well," he said, as they were nearing home. "You've got a pretty good seat, and I should think you might have good hands when you've learnt how to use them."

Laurence's spirit asserted itself. "I've got the pluck, anyhow," he said. "I took on Ginger the first day I came here."

"Oh, pluck!" said Richard; "that was ignorance."

When they dismounted before the house their positions were instantly reversed. Laurence strode into the

hall with the air of a cavalry officer, and threw down his hat and gloves and hunting crop on to a table. Richard followed him meekly.

"We'll go and see if Mrs. Moggeridge is in the morning-room," said Laurence.

Mrs. Moggeridge was writing letters in a room the embodiment of the taste of the age, or, rather, of that small part of society which had come under the influence of what was known as the æsthetic movement. It was the era of lankness and yearning, of dadoes and art shades, of lilies and sunflowers and peacocks' feathers; of furniture more objectionable even than the solid pretentious ugliness of the mid-Victorian years; and Mrs. Moggeridge's morning-room reflected its ultimate expression. The cult, however, as far as she was concerned, ended with her surroundings and stopped short at the point at which she would have offered up herself as a sacrifice. She was still the plump, active woman she had been thirteen years before—looked, indeed, very little older, and knew better than to dress herself in trailing garments of colours which would not have suited her complexion, or to adopt a languor of deportment which was far from representing her attitude of mind.

"Ah, so here you both are," she said as the boys entered the room. "And you are Richard, my dear little sister's boy. Come here and let me look at you. Yes, you are like her, but not very like; and I do not see much of your father in you. He and I are not very good friends, and I cannot pretend to be sorry. Kiss me. You are a good-looking boy; but, good gracious, child, what clothes. You look like a yokel. No, that is not so. You look like a gentleman; but gentlemen should be well dressed. Look at Laurence—

really a little beau. You must be turned out in the same way. I will see to it. You must make yourself happy here. You can have everything you want to amuse yourself with; you have only to ask for it. Now run away, both of you. I must finish these notes, and then go and dress. You will both come in to dessert."

"We've got an hour before we need dress," said Laurence, when the boys had retired. "Let's go and have a game of billiards. Can you play?"

"No; but I should like to learn, if you'll teach me."

"I'll teach you; but you'll have to be careful not to cut the cloth."

The magnificent Laurence summoned a footman to light the lamps and take the cloth off the table, and would probably have kept him to mark for them if the game had been an ordinary one. When the first concentrative minutes of the lesson were over the boys began to talk.

"Where do you go to school?" asked Laurence.

"I haven't been to school yet. I'm going to Rugby next year."

"I'm going to Eton next half. It's a much better place."

Richard opened his eyes. "Better than Rugby!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, of course; everybody knows that."

"Have you read 'Tom Brown's Schooldays'?"

"Yes. It isn't a bad book, and I dare say it isn't a bad place. But nobody would choose to go there if they had a chance of going to Eton."

"Well, I would. I'd rather go there than any other school."

"What do you know about other schools? Do you know any Eton fellows?"

"No."

"Well, then, how can you possibly tell? I know lots. My father was there and my grandfather and my uncles, and most of the fellows at my private school go there. Eton is the school for gentlemen. The others are all much rougher."

"Tom Brown's father was a gentleman, and old Brooke, oh, and all of them."

"Oh, yes, gentlemen of a sort. But most of the really big people go to Eton—most of the peers' sons and that sort. It's much more expensive than any other school."

"I'm glad I'm not going there, then. I'd rather go to a school where they are rougher. And I think Rugby's the first school in England."

"It's no good arguing with you. You don't know anything about it. You said so just now. You talk as if you'd never heard of Eton, and everybody knows it's the first school in England. Winchester and Harrow come next. Rugby's a long way behind. But I don't want to quarrel about it. You can think your own way if you like till you find out better. I suppose your pater was there, wasn't he?"

"No. But my grandfather was. Aunt Henrietta is going to send me there and to Oxford afterwards."

"I'm going to Cambridge—just for a year or so, because all my family goes there. I'm going into the Guards, so I shan't stay there long. But Oxford's all right. Lots of good people go there. Who is Aunt Henrietta? Mrs. Moggeridge?"

"Yes."

"That's rather rum. I suppose your father isn't very well off."

"No. He's a clergyman."

"Is Mrs. Moggeridge going to leave you her money?"

"Yes."

Poor little Richard, a young child in years and a baby in knowledge of the world of men, giving his answer in all innocence and good faith, how could he tell the meanings it would convey to the sophisticated young worldling who was interrogating him?

"Phew!" whistled Laurence. "You're not going to do badly for yourself. Are you quite sure? Is it all coming to you?"

"Oh, I don't know. I haven't thought about it. But she's going to send me to Rugby and to Oxford."

"Well, you're a lucky young dog—if it's true. Come on, we must bunk. It's time to dress."

Richard went upstairs, rather unwillingly. He supposed his Sunday suit of pepper and salt would meet the requirements of the case, although he was not quite comfortable about it, remembering Laurence's late elaborate toilet. However, it was the best he could do, and he was somewhat relieved to get into his bedroom where a bright fire was burning, in itself an experience, to find it laid out on his bed. He went into Laurence's room when he had effected the change and found that young gentleman in the stage of having his boots pulled off by the accommodating John.

"You're surely not going down like that," said Laurence. "There are a lot of people dining. Haven't you got any evening clothes?"

"No," said Richard, defiantly. "I'm not used to such a lot of dressing up."

Laurence faced round on him. The footman had just left the room. "Look here, young Baldock," he said. "Just you stop it. You're better than me at horses,

I don't mind saying. But in everything else you're just an ignorant young country bumpkin. You've not got the least idea how gentlemen behave or dress or what schools they go to or anything about them. If you like to go down to dinner in a country house dressed like a ploughboy in his Sunday suit it's your own lookout. But it's a bit too much to come and crow over me about it as if you were doing the right thing and I wasn't."

"I'm not crowing over you," replied Richard. "It's you that's trying to crow over me about clothes and being rich and things like that, which don't matter."

"Well, you'll soon see if they matter or not. You just take a hint, my coxy young friend, and keep your ploughboy notions to yourself, or you'll get into trouble over them. I should think even at Rugby they expect you to look more like a gentleman than you do."

Indeed there was some foundation for the young dandy's strictures. Richard was an attractive-looking boy, with fair curly hair, honest blue eyes and a freckled face, but his ready-made clothes—an ill-fitting jacket worn over a low collar, knickerbockers ending some little way below the knee and not strapped, a flannel shirt ill-disguised at the neck by a wisp of black ribbon, coarse black stockings and cheap patent leather slippers—did not show him to advantage. He felt his own deficiencies as Laurence led the way downstairs in his neat Eton suit and broad white collar, and was by no means at his ease as he entered the dining-room, where a dozen or more people, dressed as it seemed to him in every variety of unfamiliar splendour, were sitting at table, eating and drinking, talking and laughing all at the same time. The spacious room,

whose interest was centred in the brightly lit flower-laden table, the servants moving quietly but busily about their duties, the chattering diners, commonplace as they were to everyone present but himself, struck Richard with wonder and deep shyness. He would almost have given up his dreams of Rugby to find himself back again in his poorly furnished nursery at home, eating his supper of bread and cheese, with only Sarah in her most uncompromising mood to bear him company. But there was no drawing back. He followed Laurence up the room.

Mrs. Moggeridge was sitting at the head of the table, resplendent in a dress of pink silk, bediamonded and otherwise bedecked. She had on her right an elderly man of immense spruceness, like enough in feature to Laurence to enable Richard at one frightened glance to recognize him as his father. Laurence was detained at the foot of the table by a shrill, admiring lady. Richard crept quaking to the side of his aunt and stood by an empty chair till he was ordered to occupy it. A spasm went over Mrs. Moggeridge's face as she took in his appearance and bade him sit down, but she said nothing further for the moment.

"So this is the nephew, is it?" remarked her neighbour, pleasantly. "Dug out of the forest wilds, eh?" His keen eye, surrounded by innumerable crow's-feet, seemed to take in everything, and made Richard, sensitized by Laurence's diatribe, wince.

"What an oversight!" said Mrs. Moggeridge, her head turned from him, but her words quite plainly heard. "I might have known he would be sent to me like this. It is deplorable. I ought to have seen to it." Then to Richard, under her breath, "You must not come into the drawing-room to-night. Slip off quietly

when the ladies leave the room. You shall have some proper clothes to-morrow."

No one took any further notice of him. His left-hand neighbour, after a glance of surprise, devoted himself to his fruit and claret. He was a heavy man, with a massive jowl and black side whiskers, and seemed to be of opinion that the dinner table was a place for eating and drinking, for the tide of talk and laughter flowed past him and left him unmoved, placidly munching. Mrs. Moggeridge sparkled and effervesced with a decisive brilliance. The grey-haired, military-looking man on her right paid easy court to her. Richard, his soul blank and sore within him, yet observant, felt a dislike to him, although he admitted to himself that he was the finest-looking man present and a contrast to the others round the table, who were mostly of the large and prosperous mercantile variety. Laurence, farther down the table, was holding his own with self-assurance, taking as large a part in the conversation that went on around him as anybody. Richard felt more out of his element than he had ever done in his life before, and unaccountably unhappy, as he sat silent, nibbling at his supply of almonds and raisins, which he had selected from among the fruits offered to him as presenting fewest problems in the manner of consumption.

By and by Mrs. Moggeridge gave the signal to retire. Richard, obedient to command, slipped out in her wake. Laurence was holding the door, posing for notice, which was given him in unstinted measure. His glance rested triumphantly on Richard as he crept past him, but he made no remark, shutting the door and going back to his place at table and his unfinished glass of wine.

The surge of skirts swept across the hall to the drawing-room. Richard detached himself from it with-

out notice and made his way upstairs to his bedroom. It was already half-past nine and past his usual bedtime. He drew back the heavy curtains of his window, pulled up the blind, and opened the window.

There was a bright moon. The cedar-bordered lawn and the parklike sloping meadow beyond the low wall which bounded it were in silver. The air was quite still, and from the dark wood to the left of the house the voice of a nightingale came trilling. The boy was very unhappy. The life around him was something entirely outside his range of experience, and he had had his first lesson in hitherto unimagined social conditions. He felt himself shorn of respect, standing lower in the world than he had known, and although he rebelled against a judgment which condemned him for immaterial deficiencies it hurt him none the less. He longed desperately for the familiarities of the home which he felt he had valued too little, and laid his head on the window-sill and cried from home-sickness.

But presently the stillness and beauty of the night and the quiet country soothed him. He braced up his mind, left the window, undressed himself, said his prayers and got into bed, where he fell asleep instantly and did not awake when Laurence came into his room an hour later and held a candle to his face.

CHAPTER VIII

AT PARADINE PARK

MR. BLISS, who condescended to reside in Mrs. Moggeridge's house under the style of butler, but really fulfilled the duties of steward and confidential adviser, had spent his former years in the service of so exalted a society that his frequent boast that he knew what was what as well as any man living was no more than justified. Having been taken into consultation with his mistress before she retired to rest, he appeared at Richard's bedside early the next morning and informed him that he was to accompany him to London for the purpose of procuring a complete new outfit, and that his breakfast would be ready in half an hour, immediately after which they would start.

Richard jumped out of bed with alacrity. He had already been awake for over an hour, but had not been able to dress himself and go out because he had not liked to put on his offending Sunday suit again and his only other one had disappeared. It now came in neatly folded in the hands of John, together with a can of hot water, and he dressed himself quickly. He had slept off his misery of the night before, and felt exhilarated at the idea of the new life he was about to explore further. A day in London with Mr. Bliss commended itself to him as a pleasant interlude, for the butler, although pompous and unapproachable in his professional capacity, seemed to promise well as a companion. He had appeared in a light suit of a gentlemanly cut, and

there was a hint of jauntiness about him which struck Richard as an agreeable trait in his character. They set off in a light spring cart, driven by the head coachman himself, all three sitting together, Richard in the middle, and beguiled the three-mile drive by propounding riddles to one another, in which exercise Richard shone, and by a discussion of the political situation, to which he listened with respect, inclining rather to the Conservative views of the coachman than to those of Mr. Bliss, which were of an unexpectedly Radical tendency.

In the train Mr. Bliss came out still further. They travelled in a third-class carriage full of clerks and others going to their work in the city, and the butler, now free from all trace of servitude, his butlerdom having slipped from him so completely as to have made it impossible for anyone to guess his calling in life, started a general conversation, and succeeded so well in drawing everyone into it that the time passed most pleasantly. He was so evidently considered a man of standing, with opinions worth listening to and no nonsense about him, that Richard was quite proud of his companion, and did not feel in the least ashamed when a fellow passenger alluded to him as his father, although he corrected the mistake. Mr. Bliss wound up the journey by exhibiting a few simple conjuring tricks, with the help of some coppers, a handkerchief and a borrowed silk hat, and stated that if any of the company could have produced a pack of cards he would have surprised them.

The morning was spent in the region of Oxford Street, and in the course of an hour or so Richard became possessed of a larger supply of clothes than he had previously owned during the course of his life.

"I should have took you to Bond Street and thereabouts," said Mr. Bliss, "if the occasion hadn't been so pressing. But fortunately you're stock size—medium boy's—so it don't so much signify. You'll be a match for young Master Syde now, and don't you give in to him."

Luncheon at Frascati's was marked by the consumption of three ices on the part of Richard, and dressed crab on that of Mr. Bliss, after which they visited Madame Tussaud's, and paid a flying visit to the Zoological Gardens, reaching home about seven o'clock after a thoroughly satisfactory and enjoyable day. They were driven from the station in the spring cart as before, but not by the coachman. Mr. Bliss was as chatty and entertaining as ever during the first part of the drive, but became less so after they had passed the lodge gates. By the time they had reached the house his features had assumed a cast of respectable *hauteur*, and when he helped Richard to alight at the front door he addressed him as "sir."

Upon entering the house Richard was summoned into the presence of his aunt. He was wearing a new Eton suit which he had exchanged for his old one. "Ah!" said Mrs. Moggeridge. "Now you look like a little gentleman, and I shall not be ashamed of you any longer."

Richard hung his head. "It is very kind of you, Aunt Henrietta, to give me all these clothes," he said. "I am sorry I hadn't proper things when I came, but I couldn't help it."

"Bless the child," said Mrs. Moggeridge. "Of course you couldn't help it. Come and give me a kiss. And you needn't thank me for anything I do for you. You are my only living relation. I will do more for you

yet, if you are a good boy and I am pleased with you. But I think you are a good boy, and I am sure a very nice one, though there are things—But it is not your fault, and we needn't go into them. You must enjoy yourself as much as possible during your visit here. I asked Laurence on purpose to keep you company, and to teach you how to behave, and so on. For he is a very well-behaved boy, as he ought to be, for he comes of a very aristocratic family. His grandfather was the Earl of Wrotham and his father, whom you have seen, is Major-General the Honourable Sir Franklin Syde, K.C.B., a most distinguished soldier and a man of perfect breeding. And his mother, who died some years ago, was Lady Anne Syde, a daughter of the Earl of Shaston. So, you see, you have a playmate whom any boy might be proud of. Living as you do in a small country village you hardly know what is expected of boys of high position, and I wish you to learn that. It is quite possible that you may hold a high position yourself some day, though I do not say that it will be so."

The occasion seemed to Richard to warrant allusion to the subject of his dreams. "I'll learn everything you want me to, Aunt Henrietta," he said. "I want to do well when I go to Rugby. I am looking forward to it so much."

"My dear father and your mother's was at Rugby," said Mrs. Moggeridge. "Was that your father's school?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Well, I think it would be a very good thing for you to go there. I will write to Mr. Baldock about it. Though if he has settled the question, perhaps—However! Now I must go and dress for dinner, and you and

Laurence are to dine with us to-night. Bliss will tell you what to wear. You had better go and dress now. And remember you are to have a happy time here. Anything you want for your pleasure—you and Laurence—you have only got to ask for."

Richard expressed his thanks, and left the room with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction troubling him. Could it be possible that his father had made a mistake? Certainly his aunt had not spoken of his going to Rugby as if it had been her own wish and plan. But here Laurence, coming through the hall in his riding clothes, met him, and the further consideration of a disturbing idea was postponed.

"Hullo!" said Laurence. "Had a jolly time? I've been riding with father." He spoke perfunctorily, and without his usual vivacity. His face was grave, and he eyed Richard somewhat askance.

Sir Franklin Syde came into the hall. He was very smartly dressed, and his spare figure and upright carriage gave him the appearance of a young man, in spite of his white hair and tired blue eyes. "Well, my young cave-dweller," he said, "been to get a new suit of skins, eh? I hear you've been showing Laurence what you can do on horseback. You and I will ride together and have a talk about your forest. I've hunted there and enjoyed it. Now we must go and make ourselves tidy." He spoke kindly and with courtesy, and Richard felt an impulse of admiration and gratitude towards him. Laurence's face cleared. The two boys went upstairs together. "He's a fine man, my father, isn't he?" said Laurence. "He can do anything he likes, and he's seen lots of service and been wounded. He's a splendid soldier, or has been, for he's retired now."

"And he's kind to boys," added Richard.

"He doesn't treat me like a boy," said Laurence. "He tells me things. He says he wants me to be a man of the world. I don't suppose many fathers would consult their sons about things as he does me. Does your father tell you his plans and ask your advice about them?"

"No," said Richard.

"Ah, well—I'll do all I can to help him—and for my own sake, too." He gave a little laugh, not altogether agreeable, as he went into his room.

"The fact is," said Mrs. Moggeridge at dinner that evening, "that I lead a very dull life. I am an energetic woman, and what I find to do I do with all my might. But I find so little to do that interests me. I wish it were otherwise."

"My complaint is a very different one," said Sir Franklin. "There are a thousand and one things that interest and amuse me, but they all cost such a confounded lot of money that I am able to do less and less of them every year. Very soon I shall be able to afford to do nothing at all, and then I suppose I shall die from inanition."

"But what are the things to do?" asked Mrs. Moggeridge. "I have got plenty of money. I say it in no boastful spirit—in fact, I do not see that it is a thing to boast about at all, for I did not make it myself—and everybody knows it. I could do anything I wished. I have redecorated and refurnished this house from top to bottom lately, and that gave me great pleasure. It cost a great deal of money, and I think you will agree, Sir Franklin, that the general effect is good."

Sir Franklin bowed politely.

"Well, as I say, that gave me great pleasure. And I am very sorry that the work is over. I don't enjoy

living here half as much as I enjoyed making the house beautiful and comfortable to live in. But what is to be done next? The house takes some looking after, and I like doing that, but there is nothing outside, only one farm, and it does not give me enough scope."

"How different again from my situation!" said Sir Franklin. "There is my fine old house in Yorkshire almost tumbling down because I can't afford to put it in order, and nobody will take it in its present condition and do it for me; and ten thousand acres of good land badly farmed because I can't spend money on them."

"I wish it were mine," said Mrs. Moggeridge. "Then I am fond of society. But what there is here is dull, I must confess it. It suited my husband, but I cannot say that it suits me."

"My dear lady!" exclaimed Sir Franklin. "You are within a few miles of London and the best society in the world."

"But I don't know the right sort of people," said Mrs. Moggeridge. "I am perfectly frank about it. I see no reason to be anything else. I am ambitious and it would give me great pleasure to be a somebody. But I am not a somebody. My father was a poor clergyman, and my husband was a selfmade business man. I am very rich, and that is all."

"But what an all!" said Sir Franklin. "My dear lady, you don't know your power. You should not be content to live quietly here. You have the world at your feet. Why not make it give you everything you want?"

"But what do I want? Now tell me, Sir Franklin, what would you do if you were in my case?"

"I will tell you," said Sir Franklin. A slight flush came over his cheekbones, and a slight glitter into his

eyes. "But you must let me imagine myself still as I am. I could not consent to change personalities, even where the exchange would be so much to my advantage." He bowed gracefully towards his hostess. "I should first of all make my beautiful but dilapidated house one of the most perfect in England. That would take both time and money, and both would be most delightfully employed. The house is historic, and would repay the outlay as well as any in the country."

"That would certainly be a delightful undertaking," said Mrs. Moggeridge, "but when it was over?"

"There would be the estate. Farms to put into order, buildings to repair, tenants to find. The outlay would be remunerative. At present things go on anyhow. There can be no outgoings, and consequently incomings have reduced themselves to vanishing point. Then there is the shooting. That is let now, but I should take it back into my own hands. There is a moor, and some excellent coverts. In my uncle's time it was renowned, and would be again."

"A great deal to do," said Mrs. Moggeridge, "but it would all come to an end in time."

"One's enjoyment of it would never come to an end. One would fill the old place with pleasant people. The shooting would attract anybody, and the hunting is not bad. Besides, I should revive my modest stud. I used to train horses there in the old days. But that is long since over. The stables have been empty these twenty years. And I should not live there all the year round. I should exchange my modest chambers in the Albany for a good house where I could see my friends. I own I am fond of good cooking and good wine. Pardon the confession of an old man's self-indulgence. I should not mention such a thing to *you*,

if you did not treat me so much *en prince* in this respect yourself. And, indeed, there is no lady I have ever met whose cook and whose cellars are so irreproachable."

"I take pains over both," admitted Mrs. Moggeridge. "I like to set the best before my friends."

"Our tastes are one in that matter, as in many others. I am fond of music and should have a box at the opera. I should have a yacht. In fact, I should have everything that could make the remainder of my years happy and free from care. I have no doubt my ambitions may be called selfish. I admit it. But I have finished my work. I am an old useless fellow, retired from the serious business of life, and if good fortune were ever to come my way again I should take it frankly as a means of providing myself with amusement—amusement which I should take very good care others should join in as well as myself."

"I think you are quite right," said Mrs. Moggeridge. "The people we all of us like are the people who enjoy things themselves and give enjoyment to others. Your sour-faced philanthropist may gain some satisfaction from regarding his own virtue, but I doubt whether he much increases the happiness of the world, and I am sure he loses a lot himself. And what would you do, Laurence, if you had command of a great deal of money?"

"I should do all the things that father does," replied Laurence, promptly. "Lots of horses and lots of friends. That's my idea of pleasure."

"Very well put, my boy," said Sir Franklin, approvingly. "But pleasure isn't everything, you know. You would serve your Queen and country first, as I have done in my humble way. I've done my work. I'm

"Well, all right. I don't care. Come on, string for break. I say, what sort of a man's your father?"

"He's very clever," said Richard. "He writes things in papers and magazines, and he's a fine scholar."

"Rather religious, ain't he?"

"Well, he's a clergyman."

"And I suppose they've got to be. But Mrs. Moggeridge told me that he was—well—a terror. She said she was going to give you a good time here because you had such a bad time at home."

"I don't have a bad time at all. And Aunt Henrietta oughtn't to say such things about my father. I've never heard him say anything against her."

"Well, why should he? There's nothing to say. That's a good cannon. Mark me two up. Especially when she's going to leave you all her money."

"I don't know that she is."

"Well, you said she was when I asked you before."

"People have told me so at home, but I never thought much about it. Father has never said so. He only told me that she was going to send me to Rugby and Oxford."

"I wish she'd send me to Eton and Cambridge."

"Why, you said you were going there, anyhow."

"Well, so I was. But my father said yesterday that he was afraid he couldn't afford it as things are at present. I must say it was a bit of a jar, but he was so awfully nice about it that it didn't seem so bad when he told me. He said he should feel it more than I should if it couldn't be managed. Still, of course, I've got relations who might help. But my father says they've paid up such a lot for him that he doesn't think they will."

"I'm very sorry," said Richard. "I was very sorry

last night when your father said he couldn't afford to live in his beautiful house and do what he wanted. I think the nation ought to give him some money. He's been a brave soldier."

"Oh, he's got his pension, and it isn't a bad one, only I expect he's anticipated a good deal of it."

"What's that?"

"Why, run into debt over it. You don't know much about money affairs, or what smart, popular men like my father do. His uncle left him a fine property and he ran through it when he was a subaltern. He lived at a tremendous pace, and kept lots of racehorses. He nearly won the Derby once, and you can't go in for that on nothing. Then he married and got another start, for my mother had some money, but that soon went too. Of course, there's the place in Yorkshire. But it doesn't bring in anything now, and it's heavily mortgaged. I shall have it when he dies, but it won't be much good to me."

"Have you ever lived there?"

"Not since I can remember. It's been shut up for years. But it's a jolly place, I can tell you. This is nothing to it. I go about to different relations in the holidays, and sometimes my father has me for a few days in his chambers. I enjoy that, for he takes me to see all sorts of things and people. There aren't many fathers, I can tell you, who take such trouble about their sons' education as he does."

"Do you go to the British Museum?"

"British Museum! Fancy my father at the British Museum! I don't mean that sort of education. He says he is going to make a man of the world of me, and wants me to begin early. Most people, he says, haven't an idea of how to amuse themselves properly. We've

"Well, all right. I don't care. Come on, string for break. I say, what sort of a man's your father?"

"He's very clever," said Richard. "He writes things in papers and magazines, and he's a fine scholar."

"Rather religious, ain't he?"

"Well, he's a clergyman."

"And I suppose they've got to be. But Mrs. Moggeridge told me that he was—well—a terror. She said she was going to give you a good time here because you had such a bad time at home."

"I don't have a bad time at all. And Aunt Henrietta oughtn't to say such things about my father. I've never heard him say anything against her."

"Well, why should he? There's nothing to say. That's a good cannon. Mark me two up. Especially when she's going to leave you all her money."

"I don't know that she is."

"Well, you said she was when I asked you before."

"People have told me so at home, but I never thought much about it. Father has never said so. He only told me that she was going to send me to Rugby and Oxford."

"I wish she'd send me to Eton and Cambridge."

"Why, you said you were going there, anyhow."

"Well, so I was. But my father said yesterday that he was afraid he couldn't afford it as things are at present. I must say it was a bit of a jar, but he was so awfully nice about it that it didn't seem so bad when he told me. He said he should feel it more than I should if it couldn't be managed. Still, of course, I've got relations who might help. But my father says they've paid up such a lot for him that he doesn't think they will."

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"British Museum! Fancy my father at the British Museum! I don't mean that sort of education. He says he is going to make a man of the world of me, and wants me to begin early. Most people, he says, haven't an idea of how to amuse themselves properly. We've

only got one life, and it's a pity to waste an hour of it. It goes soon enough."

This philosophy of life was so unlike that into which Richard had been initiated at home that its expression interested him. He thought that on the whole it had something to recommend it, although Laurence's manner of setting it forth erred on the side of crudity.

At luncheon Laurence took advantage of his education as a man of the world and carried on with no little resource and self-possession an entertaining conversation with his hostess. Mrs. Moggeridge was charmed.

"I think you shall come driving with me this afternoon," she said; "I have to pay some calls. Richard, you will not mind being left to yourself, will you? I must have the brougham, as it is wet, and there is not room for more than two."

Richard, who had sat almost completely silent during the progress of the meal, did not mind being left to himself in the least, and said so, perhaps with more energy than the occasion warranted, for his aunt looked at him critically. "I suppose it is hardly to be expected that a boy should like to go driving in a closed carriage," she said. "Laurence, I do not wish to take you if you prefer to remain behind."

"Indeed, I would much rather come with you," replied Laurence, fervently. "I shall enjoy it, and it is very kind of you to ask me." But when the boys were alone he expressed himself in a different manner.

"What a bore!" he said. "If there is one thing I do hate it is pottering along in a brougham."

Honest Richard opened his eyes. "Why, you said you would enjoy it!" he exclaimed.

“Of course I did—to her. She wouldn’t have liked it if I had said I didn’t want to go.”

“She said it would please her best if we enjoyed ourselves in our own way.”

“Well, if you think you’re pleasing her better than I am, you’re welcome to your opinion. *Blow* the beastly brougham!”

CHAPTER IX

MRS. MOGGERIDGE MAKES PRESENTS

RICHARD stood at the door while Mrs. Moggeridge and Laurence were packed into the brougham with great ceremony. Laurence had apparently recovered his good humour, for he laughed and joked with his companion as Mr. Bliss tucked a fur rug round his knees and otherwise arranged for their comfort, and altogether behaved as if the entertainment arranged for him were the very one above all others he would have chosen if he had been left to himself. Richard felt a trifle forlorn as they drove away, for his aunt had not even given him a nod of farewell, and the still falling rain exercised a depressing influence. He was used to being alone, but this afternoon he felt inclined for company. Mr. Bliss stood for a moment or two on the steps of the doorway watching the retreating carriage. Richard, after his experience of the day before, was inclined to regard him as an intimate friend in spite of the constrained air he adopted in the presence of his mistress. "I say," he said, in a friendly manner, "what are you going to do this afternoon?"

Mr. Bliss turned upon him a look compounded of stateliness and respect. "I have my work to do, sir," he replied.

"Oh," said Richard, somewhat taken aback. "I thought you might like to come and have a game at something in the schoolroom."

"I should not think of such a thing, sir," replied Mr. Bliss, and receded with dignity.

Richard, thus repulsed, wandered aimlessly into the schoolroom, and stood at the window watching the dripping branches of the cedars and the soaked beds of daffodils. He felt homesick. The ways of great houses such as this and of their inhabitants were strange to him, and he wished himself back in his father's rectory, and above all in the forest. "I shouldn't mind the rain a bit there," he said to himself. "I should have something to do indoors, or if I wanted to I should go out." Then it occurred to him that there was nothing to stop him going out now if he wished to, and with a returning sense of freedom not altogether unmixed with guilt, he took his cap and ran out into the garden and thence into the woods which surrounded the house on two sides. Here he roamed happy and contented for an hour, and in surroundings so familiar recovered his equanimity. He met a keeper, who first shouted threats at him for trespassing and then apologized when he disclosed his identity. They had some agreeable conversation together, and the keeper expressed himself surprised at the extent of Richard's knowledge. "The other young gentleman, he 'ardly knows a rabbit from a hare," said the keeper, and Richard was pleased at the implied compliment.

When he thought it time to go back to the house the rain had ceased. The afternoon sun streamed out on to dripping trees and bushes. The scent of the soil rose up strong and sweet, and the birds woke into joyous clamour. Passing through a shrubbery which lay between the wood and the garden, Richard was surprised to meet Mr. Bliss, with a deerstalker cap on his head and a light overcoat over his butler's attire, smoking a cigar in placid contentment. He was about to pass him with a mere sign of recognition, when Mr. Bliss sur-

prised him by coming to a halt in the shrubby path and taking a large coloured handkerchief from his pocket, from which, after a few of those flourishes and passes employed by all conjurers, he produced first one billiard ball, then a second, and then a third, the whole operation being performed in complete silence and with a solemnity beyond description.

"Never been able to get that right before," said Mr. Bliss, with great satisfaction, as he returned the handkerchief and billiard balls to his pocket. "It was first class, wasn't it? Never a rattle or as much as a clock, and the folds as natural as if you was going to blow your nose. That's art, that is."

"I never saw anything better done in my life," said Richard. "I wish you'd do it again."

"No," said Mr. Bliss. "It was just a flash of genius. I'm a long way from getting it so perfect that I could do it every time for certain. If I was to try it again now I should bungle it. You practise for weeks together and you think you're never going to succeed. Then there comes a little bit of light like that, and you're encouraged to go on again till you get perfect. That's how all great things are done in the world. Now you see these billiard balls?" Mr. Bliss took them again out of his pocket. "What do they represent? First of all months, and perhaps years, of steady practice on a table—I bought 'em off a marker in Stoke Newington. They was his own and he'd used 'em so much that they wasn't quite true. But they served his turn. He'd got so good by practising with these very balls that he could beat 'most anybody that come along, and he'll be champion before he dies, you mark my words. I've had 'em three years now and I've kept 'em no more idle than they was before. There

was very little their former owner couldn't do with 'em in his time, and there's very little I can't do with 'em in mine. Steady hard work, that's what they represent, day after day, month after month, and year after year. It's a lesson; and whenever you feel downcast over what you're doing—it may not be juggling, it may not be billiard-playing—I don't care what it is—you remember John Bliss and his billiard balls, and take heart."

Richard expressed his gratitude for this lesson, which he thought might possibly prove of value to him in the future, and asked for an exhibition of skill. This was given to him, and Mr. Bliss certainly achieved some surprising feats which showed that he had practised with his brains as well as his hands. Richard thought it all most remarkable, and the agreeable relations that had existed between them during their previous day's outing together seemed to be fully restored. Mr. Bliss made no reference to his change of attitude, but Richard now fully understood that inside the house he wished to be regarded as a superior servant, a very superior and dignified servant, while in his hours of leisure he was a man and a juggler, very well disposed towards the world at large and towards himself in particular. His disposition, indeed, towards Richard received a striking proof when the exhibition of jugglery had been completed and admired. Mr. Bliss leaned towards him and put a finger on his shoulder. "A word of warning," he said, confidentially. "I can put it to you out here where I employ my leisure and throw off the cares of office. Take notice of what I say, but don't repeat it. If you ain't careful you're liable to be screwed out—screwed out." Mr. Bliss illustrated his meaning by the manipulation of an imaginary corkscrew. "There's

them as wish you well," he continued, "and those as'd like to take your place. You watch it, and remember afterwards as it was John Bliss who gave you warning."

So innocent and inexperienced was Richard that he stared at his adviser without the remotest idea as to what his mysterious words betokened. He was about to ask for an explanation when the creak of carriage wheels was heard on the wet gravel of the drive not so far off. Mr. Bliss turned on his heel immediately and hurried towards the house, whither Richard presently followed him.

Mrs. Moggeridge and Laurence had just alighted from the carriage, assisted by Mr. Bliss and his satellites, the butler shaping to the eye so vividly as the very type and essence of all butlerhood that it was impossible to imagine him having the slightest affinity with the arts of the juggler, or with any other relaxation whatever. Richard came round the corner of the house and stood by the door as Mrs. Moggeridge went into the hall. He was very wet and his boots were covered with mud. Such a condition was as common as dryness to him at home. He was accustomed to go out in all weathers, and had never possessed an umbrella in his life. He would dry his own clothes and boots before the kitchen fire, and not even his father would reproach him for getting them wet. But when Mrs. Moggeridge beheld him her hands went up in horror.

"Where on earth have you been?" she cried.

"In the woods," faltered Richard.

"Well, now, that is really too bad," exclaimed Mrs. Moggeridge. "The clothes that I bought you only yesterday ruined—absolutely ruined! Here is Laurence looking clean and tidy, like a gentleman, and you—whom I hoped to make the same—like a little tramp.

I am very displeased. Go upstairs and change your things at once, and do not go out again without asking my permission."

Richard hung his head as she swept into the house, and blushed hotly. This public reprimand hurt him to the core. He looked up and saw Laurence's eyes fixed on him half in contempt, half as it seemed in triumph. He did not understand the look, but it made him angry.

"It's nonsense to say I look like a tramp," he said. "And I haven't spoilt my clothes. They've only just got to be dried."

"You'd better tell Mrs. Moggeridge so," said Laurence. "It's nothing to do with me. I don't know what you're staring at me for as if you wanted to quarrel."

"Then what do you look at me like that for?" asked Richard, not at all appeased. "You're glad she's vexed with me."

Laurence laughed. "No, I'm not, old chap," he said. "Don't get waxy. Go and change your clothes and come down and have a game."

He turned away towards the sitting-room, and Richard went upstairs, half-ashamed of himself. If Laurence had retorted angrily, as most boys of his age would have done, there would have been a royal quarrel which would have eased Richard's spirits immensely. As it was he was oppressed with a sense of his own inferiority. He might despise the other boy's taste for dress and his clever drawing-room manners. He could not despise this easy self-control, ignoring occasions of offence. It put its owner above him. He hardly knew whether he admired Laurence or disliked him. Towards his aunt his feelings were entirely different. He had regarded her before as an amiable affectionate lady, so

easy-going as almost to approach folly. She had now put herself into the category of grown-up people without any genuine sympathy with the ways of boyhood, a person to be propitiated when met, but if possible to be avoided. The realization of her true character was a blow to Richard. He felt he would never really be happy with her, and the sooner he went home the better.

To his intense surprise, however, when he went downstairs to the schoolroom, Mrs. Moggeridge was ensconced behind the tea-urn and greeted him without a trace of the confusion she might have been expected to feel at meeting again with one upon whom she had put an affront. "Come along, Richard," she said. "Come to my tea-party. Or, rather, come and help entertain me as a guest at yours. Laurence has given me a cordial invitation which I hope you will endorse."

Really, his aunt was rather a remarkable woman. Richard eyed her questioningly, as she rattled on with Laurence in the highest of spirits, but was soon affected by her gaiety, and lost all but an uncomfortable subconsciousness of her late anger. After all he was not unaccustomed to reprimands at home. It was the way of the grown-up world to ride roughshod over your more sensitive feelings. Perhaps it was not necessary to take her severity seriously, as she did not appear inclined to do so herself. She was nice enough to him now. But she was still nicer to Laurence, who seemed to have flown straight to the pinnacle of her favour.

As the boys were at breakfast the next morning a message was brought in from the head keeper, Richard's friend of the day before, that he was going to shoot some rabbits and that the young gentlemen might like to accompany him. They did so, and spent a most

enjoyable morning. The keeper allowed them one shot each with his own gun, and though neither of them hit anything, for he would not allow them to shoot a sitting rabbit, it was enough to fire them both with a burning desire to take further part in this fascinating sport. "You can't shoot no more without a licence," he said. "I should get into trouble. And my guns is too heavy for you. Ask the mistress to get you a gun licence each and a little gun, and you can come out with me again. I'll learn you to hold straight. You can't do better than begin with rabbits, so long as you aim at 'em running."

"You ask Mrs. Moggeridge," said Laurence, as they returned to the house.

"I don't like to," said Richard. "She has given us such a lot already. It seems ungrateful."

"She'll be only too pleased. She has said lots of times we could ask her for anything we wanted."

"Then why don't you ask her? She likes you better than me."

"No, she doesn't. It's only because you don't take the trouble to amuse her. Besides, you're her nephew. You can ask her for things when I can't."

"I don't think I shall ask her. I don't like to."

"Bah! You're a funk."

"No, I'm not. And if I am, you're just as bad."

"Well, all right, then, we can't shoot. Flitch won't let us use his gun any more."

"Of course, she has said—several times—that we are to ask her for anything we want."

"That's just what I told you. I suppose she wants to be taken at her word."

"Still—two guns—and a gun licence each, that's another pound. It's a good lot."

"Not to her. It's nothing at all."

"Well, I don't mind asking her if you come and back me up."

"No. You must do it by yourself."

"Who's the funk now?"

"It's not funk. You're her nephew and I'm only her guest. Of course you're the one to ask her. You needn't ask her straight out. You can work up to it."

"If I ask her at all I shall ask her straight out. I should be a funk if I did the other thing."

Mrs. Moggeridge was writing in her boudoir. "Now what is it?" she said, when Richard presented himself before her. "I am very busy. I hope you are enjoying yourselves, you and Laurence. You may have everything you want, but you must not disturb me when I'm busy."

The fates seemed propitious.

"Thank you very much, Aunt Henrietta," said Richard. "We have been shooting rabbits with Flicht. But he won't let us shoot any more unless we have licences and guns of our own. May we?"

Mrs. Moggeridge looked at him. "May you what?" she asked.

"May we have a gun each and a gun licence?"

"You mean will I buy you each a gun?"

"Yes."

"Then you should say so. May you have a gun might mean anything. I have done a good deal for your pleasure. I must confess I am a little disappointed that you are not satisfied."

"Oh, Aunt Henrietta!" cried Richard, cut to the heart. "Indeed I am. But you told us to ask and I didn't think you would mind. But if you would rather not, we shall be just as happy without."

"That is nonsense. If you want to shoot you will naturally be disappointed if you can't. Does Laurence want to as much as you do?"

"Yes."

"Then why cannot he come and ask too? Go and fetch him."

Laurence was not very far off. "Will she?" he asked, when he was summoned.

"I don't know," said Richard. "She didn't quite like my asking. I wish I hadn't."

"Do you want to go shooting with Flitch, Laurence?" asked Mrs. Moggeridge when the boys came into the room.

"Oh, I should love to," cried Laurence, enthusiastically.

"Very well, then, I will send for Flitch and tell him to buy you a gun each this afternoon, and to take out licences. The guns are my presents to you both, and I hope you will get a great deal of enjoyment out of them. They shall be good ones, so that you may use them until you are grown up."

Laurence went up and kissed her. "You really are too awfully kind to us, Mrs. Moggeridge," he said. "But you have done such a lot already. I've never had such a good time anywhere."

Mrs. Moggeridge, who loved to play the lady bountiful, and to be thanked for doing so, beamed upon him. "It is a pleasure to do anything for you, dear boy," she said. "And I am sure you are grateful, although there is nothing to be grateful for. Well, Richard, you have got your wish, and if you want anything further I have no doubt you will ask for it. Indeed, I desire you to do so. Now go and find Flitch and tell him to come to me."

The guns were bought that afternoon and arrived at Paradine Park at the same time as Sir Franklin Syde, who had been in London for the past two days. The boys, eager to behold their new treasures, were in the hall. The guns, each in a new leather case, and two boxes of cartridges, were laid on the table.

"Hullo!" said Sir Franklin. "What is this?"

Laurence looked at his father, slightly askance. "Mrs. Moggeridge has given us each a gun," he said. "We are going out to-morrow to shoot rabbits."

"How did she know you wanted a gun?" inquired Sir Franklin. "Did you ask her?"

Laurence was silent. "I did," said Richard.

"And you backed him up, I suppose," said Sir Franklin to his son. "I won't have it. Mrs. Moggeridge has done everything she could think of to amuse you, and you reward her by asking for valuable presents. No gentleman behaves like that. I say again I won't have it. Come with me."

He marched off to Mrs. Moggeridge's room followed by Laurence. Richard, stricken with shame, remained behind.

"Mrs. Moggeridge," said Sir Franklin, "I am ashamed to hear that a son of mine has forgotten himself so far as to ask for and to accept a valuable present from you. I am deeply annoyed—quite ashamed that all your generous kindness should be rewarded in this way."

Mrs. Moggeridge looked bewildered for a moment. "Oh, the gun," she said. "My dear Sir Franklin, it is a mere trifle. It is nothing but a pleasure to give him one. I like to see boys learn to shoot and that sort of thing early."

"Of course," replied Sir Franklin. "And I should

have let him begin this next season and given him a gun. I have no objection to his beginning here with the rabbits, but it is his asking you, who have been so kind to him, that I am ashamed of. I would not have believed that he could so far have forgotten himself."

"Oh, but he did not ask," said Mrs. Moggeridge. "Not at all. It was Richard who asked—for himself. I said I would give him a gun, and then I wished to treat Laurence in the same way and sent for him. He was very grateful, and behaved charmingly, I assure you. Ask—no, nothing of the sort."

"Oh," said Sir Franklin.

"It was Richard who asked," said Mrs. Moggeridge again. "He came in by himself. It was not until I sent for Laurence that he knew anything about it."

"That makes a difference," said Sir Franklin. "Of course, your nephew has a right—perhaps—though I think after what you have done for their enjoyment—but that is no concern of mine. At any rate, I should have been very angry if I had thought Laurence had behaved in that way."

"With regard to Laurence you may set your mind quite at rest, General," said Mrs. Moggeridge. "He, at any rate, made no sort of suggestion or hint, and the small present came to him as a complete surprise. It was so, was it not, Laurence?"

Laurence hesitated and grew red.

"Was it so, or not?" asked his father, sharply.

"Richard did say——" he began.

"Richard told you he was going to ask," interrupted Mrs. Moggeridge. "That is very likely. But you did not come in and ask with him. No doubt you felt you would rather not, and I appreciate your delicacy, though there was no occasion for it. I think

you may be quite satisfied, Sir Franklin, and I hope you will let him accept the gun and say no more about it."

"You are kindness itself," returned Sir Franklin. "But if you will allow me I will give him the gun myself. I meant to give him one this year anyhow, and I would rather he had his first gun from me. I should have put off his shooting for a year if it had been as I feared, for I could not have allowed such ingratitude to pass."

So it was arranged, and also that Sir Franklin should go out with the boys next day and give them their first lesson himself. At dinner that night Laurence, now entirely freed from apprehensions, was in the highest spirits. Sir Franklin talked of moors and coverts and stubbles and of his own introduction to the art of shooting many years before. Mrs. Moggeridge listened with interest and threw in an observation now and then. Richard was tacitly ignored and sat mute and miserable. When dinner was over he slipped away into the schoolroom. The two guns lay on a table in their new leather cases. Laurence had been examining his before dinner, but Richard had let his lie. It gave him no pleasure now, and he would willingly have been rid of it and let his chances of shooting go by for ever if he could have escaped the memory of his ungrateful request. It now seemed to him a shameful thing to have done, and he longed to ask pardon of his aunt, but he did not dare to do so. Laurence, of course, had escaped all disagreeable consequences—Laurence always did. He did not know exactly how it had been done in this instance, for Laurence had not been very communicative on the subject, but he felt instinctively that he himself must have suffered in order to bring about a result so

satisfactory to the other. He was very unhappy, too unhappy to brood on the treachery or to realize it as treachery. He longed for his home. No one seemed to want him here. He had sat in the schoolroom, cold and miserable, for half an hour, and no one had been near him. He cried a little, and then went up to bed. There was nothing to stay up for, and there was no pleasure to look forward to on the morrow.

CHAPTER X

RICHARD'S RETURN

"I SHOULD like to consult with you, Sir Franklin," said Mrs. Moggeridge when Laurence had gone to bed. "Let me come and talk to you while you smoke your cigar."

The General was of course delighted, and found himself presently ensconced in a comfortable chair in front of the smoking-room fire, prepared to listen to the confidences of his hostess, who sat on the other side of the hearth.

"I hope you will forgive an old friend," she said. "I must speak plainly, and you must not take offence. Laurence—he is a charming boy. My heart goes out to him. We drove together yesterday and he told me something. I was pleased that he should confide in me. My feelings towards him are maternal. He seemed grievously disappointed—well, I must come to it—he said that you had told him you could not afford to carry out the plans you had formed for him—Eton, Cambridge—the educational plans."

Sir Franklin leant forward in his chair and looked into the fire. "It is perfectly true," he said. "I have been unfortunate lately. I don't know why I should hide it from a friend so kind as yourself that I have been extravagant in past years—damnably extravagant, and my means are now precarious. Enough for my own simple wants I have, but for the boy—the extra money has to be found—well, in ways that I need not particularize. And, in short, I have not been able to find it."

"I quite understand," said Mrs. Moggeridge, who did not in the least understand that the chances of Laurence's education were dependent upon the turn of a card or the pace of a horse. "Now, I have a proposal to make to you. Let me bear the expense of Laurence's education, until he has been through his school and University time—and after that we will see." She held up her hand, expostulatory against an exclamation of Sir Franklin's. "Wait," she said, "I am rich and I have no children of my own. I feel towards the boy as a mother might. It will give me the greatest pleasure. Do not deprive me of it. And no one need know."

"Your offer," said Sir Franklin, "is generosity itself, and I should not be so churlish as to refuse it off-hand for the sake of petty pride—pride which I should indulge in at my boy's expense. But have you thought? There is the other boy—your nephew."

Mrs. Moggeridge's face darkened. "Richard does not please me," she said. "He does not show up well beside Laurence. One has only to see them together. Take to-day's episode for instance. His coming to ask me—I do not wish to be unjust to the boy, and I had certainly told them both to ask for anything they wanted for their amusement, but—well, tell me frankly how you view the matter yourself."

"I made it clear, I think," returned Sir Franklin, "that if Laurence had behaved in that way I should have taken a serious view of his conduct. I should have considered it the height of ingratitude after all that you have done to make them happy. But the conditions are, of course, different. Under the circumstances I do not see that my young friend Richard is seriously to blame."

"How so? The two boys are on the same footing here."

"Hardly so, are they? Master Baldock looks upon himself as your heir and the natural recipient of your bounties."

"My heir! Good heavens! How do you know that?"

"He told Laurence so."

"Can I believe my ears? And I have never said one word. Oh, the ingratitude and self-seeking of the world! And in a child! It is incredible—monstrous. I will have nothing more to do with him. I am shocked beyond measure."

"But, my dear lady," said Sir Franklin, "you must consider. He must have been told this."

"Yes, and by that odious man, his father. My little sister—there was no one whom I loved more deeply—but her husband I always detested, and it is my belief that he killed her. I have never forgiven him, though it is years ago since she died. I did say something to my sister about treating the child as my own son. I remember it, and if it had been a definite promise I should be the last woman in the world to go back from my word. But I have never considered it so. Naturally I must be allowed to see how the child turns out before I can carry out my wishes—my very ardent wishes, for I loved my sister dearly. But her husband I abhor, always have, and always shall; and when I see the boy growing up like him, grasping, greedy, looking forward to my death that he may spend my money—but he never shall—I am quite estranged. I see nothing of his mother in him. I dislike the child. I will send him home. I will do nothing for him."

"You will send him, I suppose, to school and to college."

"I shall not. His father may do that."

"It is not very much to do. Forgive my plain speaking. It would hardly affect you. I believe the boy has set his heart on going to Rugby and Oxford as much as my Laurence wants to go to Eton. I should feel very uncomfortable at the idea of a son of mine ousting your own nephew."

"He would be doing nothing of the sort. As you say, I am quite rich enough to make it a matter of small concern to me whether I paid for one boy's education, or two or twenty. What I want to do for Laurence would in no way depend on my decision in regard to Richard. You may leave that out of account, but it is very generous of you to plead for him."

"I do not feel that in the least. I do not care for the boy particularly. I do not think myself that he compares favourably with my son, but his bringing up has been very different, and from what you say his father cannot be a very pleasant sort of gentleman to meet. But he ought to have his start in life——"

"Then let his father give it to him. He is his only child, and he can deny himself. Left to myself my impulses are generous. I do not wish to hoard my wealth and spend it entirely on myself; but what angers me now, and always, is when I suspect others of planning to get hold of my money. I feel no kindness towards them and can feel none."

Perhaps it was the warm glow of the fire that turned Sir Franklin's cheeks a deeper red. "It is not my affair, of course, to advise you as to your treatment of your relations," he said, "and I will say no more. With regard to Laurence, while thanking you from the

bottom of my heart for your most generous offer, I think I must try to do what is necessary for the boy myself or apply to his relations."

Then Mrs. Moggeridge, putting aside her almost hysterical irritation, pleaded with him earnestly. She had set her heart on doing this for her favourite. She had never met a boy who had so attracted her. She would be grievously disappointed if she could not have the joy of watching over his interests during his boyhood and youth. She would feel widowed indeed, utterly lonely, if her desire was taken from her. She must have some young thing to take an interest in and to help on in the world. And the end of it was that Sir Franklin capitulated, gracefully, and with many heartfelt expressions of gratitude, and Mrs. Moggeridge sought her couch with the pleased feeling that she had got her own way and that the opportunity of being of some use in the world was not denied her.

Richard awoke the next morning, as is the blessed habit of youth, disposed to brighter views than those which had coloured his lying down. He no longer felt disposed, as he had done the night before, to request his aunt to take back his gun. He thought that, after all, it would be of little use to her, while it would be one of his own chief treasures. She had given it to him, and, while he still felt a little ashamed of asking for it, still she *had* told him to ask for what he wanted and he had only taken her at her word. He thought that an additional warm expression of his gratitude for all the pleasures she had provided for him would probably balance accounts and leave him free to take advantage of this new one with a clear conscience.

At this point Mr. Bliss came into his room. He had on the same suit as he had worn during their late expedi-

tion together, but his face was not so cheerful as it had been on that occasion. Neither was there a hint in his demeanour of the man and the juggler. All was butler, of the most respectful and least approachable.

"You are to leave by the nine-thirty train, sir," he said, "and I am to accompany you to town and see you off from Waterloo. Breakfast will be ready in half an hour, and if you will get up now I will send John to pack your clothes."

Richard stared at him, his face suddenly pale. "See me off at Waterloo?" he echoed. "Why? Am I going home?"

"So Mrs. Moggeridge has informed me, sir," said the butler, busying himself with Richard's bath.

"But why?" cried Richard. "I wasn't going home for a long time. Has my father sent for me?"

"I am not aware, sir. At least—no."

"Am I being sent away? Oh, why? What have I done? Do tell me, Mr. Bliss." The poor child was in great distress, ready to cry, lifting a piteous face that would have melted the stoniest of butlers. Mr. Bliss allowed himself a slight relaxation.

"There, sir, don't take on," he said; "it's all right. I'll explain when we get into the carriage. Now make haste and dress and come down to breakfast. I've ordered you an omelette."

Richard dressed himself hurriedly. He was terribly upset. He had suffered harshness and injustice, but never such treatment as this. His lip quivered, and only a sense of his manhood kept back the tears which the secrecy of night-time might have made permissible, but not the hours of daylight. He was to be sent off in disgrace, surely not for the crime of asking for a present—a crime that had already been condoned, if

somewhat grudgingly? Then why? He had committed no other. He thought of asking to see his aunt, but he felt instinctively that his request would be useless; and as instinctively he realized that Laurence was no friend of his, and he would get no satisfaction in taking his trouble to him. There was none of the free-masonry of boyhood between them, and he would be ashamed to see Laurence now while this disgrace hung over him. The element of uncertainty in his trouble increased it. He was deplorably unhappy, and his grief had something of the intensity of manhood's sufferings, marking it off from the easily digested trials of youth.

The morning was dull and leaden. He was driven away from the house in the station brougham—a forlorn little figure sitting alone in the carriage, for Mr. Bliss shut him in and mounted the box beside the coachman. But when the lodge gates were passed the carriage drew up; Mr. Bliss got down from the box, opened the carriage door, stepped in without a word and took his seat beside Richard. They drove on again.

“Now there’s one thing you’ve got to remember,” said Mr. Bliss, impressively. “Whatever happens in the future, whether the crawlings and shovings of those anxious to creep into the place of others is successful or not, you’ve got a friend in John Bliss. The necessities of professional life do not always allow of its being shown as much as could be wished, but the friendship’s there warm and faithful, and there it will remain, come what will.”

Richard felt agreeably consoled by this speech, the intention of which he thoroughly understood, if its expression conveyed no very definite ideas to his mind, and he ventured to slip his hand into that of his companion.

Mr. Bliss gave it an encouraging pat and returned it to him; having no use for it as a permanent possession.

"As man to man," pursued Mr. Bliss, still with great earnestness, "I can make certain disclosures to you which, in other circumstances, must not part my lips, knowing that confidences will be respected and not brought up at times when it would be awkward so to do. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"You mean," replied Richard, "that we always like each other, but we keep it to ourselves when you're on duty."

"On duty," repeated Mr. Bliss; "that's just the way to express it. You've got a good and contriving brain, and I can only say that if your liking for me is on a footing with my liking for you we're friends for life, always taking into consideration the differences of birth and education. Now, knowing that it will go no farther, I'll tell you this: You've been made a victim—a victim of two things. One is the wiles of self-seekers who ought to be ashamed of their cunning ways of going on, high up in the world though they be, and courageous in a bodily sense, I make no doubt. The other is the capriciousness of—I won't say lady, because here I must be cautious; I won't say person, because that would not be becoming—the capriciousness of people whose wealth and nature makes them so, and are readily worked upon by designers. I've no doubt you take my meanings."

Richard thought that he did, and said so.

"Very well, then," continued Mr. Bliss. "Now, what I want to say to you is this: Nothing you could have done would have made things different, you being what you are, an honest, straightforward young gentleman, and not one to meet guile with guile. So, in the first

place, don't you blame yourself for what's happened, and don't allow others to blame you when you're called upon to explain things at the other end of your journey. You behaved quite right all through, and what's come about isn't to be attributed to any fault of yours. You take my advice and rest your mind on that."

This piece of advice was just what Richard wanted to assuage the pangs of his wounded self-respect, and his spirit rose under his adviser's commendation.

"We're getting near the station," continued Mr. Bliss; "but I've one thing more to say to you. You've seen me in my professional capacity, and if you go into great houses later on in life you'll be forced to acknowledge the truth that there's no man in my position—and I don't care who he is, or what training he's had—who beats me at it. And how do you think I began? I'll tell you what no one else knows in this world, and I'll tell you it because I believe it'll be a lesson to you, and I know, as a friend, you'll respect my confidence. I began in a workhouse. That's where I was born and bred. And do you think that leads to positions of responsibility in noblemen's families, such as I've held, before you're thirty? Not quite. But the career I set before me that I followed out with only myself to depend on, and I got to the top of the tree. Was I content when I got there? No. I took up another occupation in my spare hours—an occupation that requires perseverance and concentration above most, and——Well, you've seen for yourself whether I'm making a success of it or not."

"I think you're wonderful at it," said Richard. "I shouldn't think there's a cleverer juggler anywhere than you."

Mr. Bliss's face took on an expression of pain. "Oh,

you mustn't say that," he expostulated. "There's hours and days and perhaps years of application necessary before I rise to the level of the highest, if I ever do. Ambitious you must be, self-confident you will be all the better for being, but you must never be self-satisfied, not till the end of your career. And the application of all this to you is, stand on your own feet. Make up your mind early in life what you're going to do, and rely on yourself for doing it. If accidents come, such as riches might in your case, use them to further your aims, but don't depend on them. It isn't riches you want to make you happy in this world; it's work—work with an object. No capriciousness nor no base contrivings can take that away from you, and you'll be all the better man for holding yourself loose from what accident may or may not bring you, and depending on yourself. Here we are at the station, and that's my last word to you, carefully thought over, and the word of a friend. Work with an object."

Richard thought this homily most remarkable, impressed more by the force and earnestness with which it was delivered than by its subject matter. But the thoughtful manner in which it was summed up in a few words which might abide by him, enabled him afterwards to recall its main purpose, as a phrase is sometimes anchored to the memory by a word, or a word by a single letter.

Mr. Bliss saw him off at Waterloo and furnished him with mental provender for the journey in the shape of numerous attractive journals and magazines, for which the necessary payment was drawn by the promptings of friendship from his own pocket. He also shook him warmly by the hand as the train moved away, and said, "I shan't forget you. Remember, work with an object."

Good-bye," and Richard felt considerably cheered by his kindness, as well as fortified for the trial that still awaited him.

He arrived at the station from which Beechurst was situated some three or four miles early in the afternoon, and found Job Wilding waiting for him in the shabby old vicarage pony cart drawn by one of his own forest ponies. Neither the appearance of the equipage nor of its driver could compare in point of splendour with those to which he had lately been accustomed, but his heart gave a leap as he came out of the station-yard and their home-like familiarity met his sight. His home-coming was not of the most auspicious, but he felt thankful for it all the same.

Job's mood appeared to be one of rather truculent reticence. He gave Richard no greeting, but remarked in an injured voice, "Train's nearly 'alf-hour late."

"Yes, I know," replied Richard. "How are you, Job?"

"None the better for setting 'ere in a east wind, thanks to unpunctualness. Why can't people be punctual? Gardeners' flesh and blood's the same as other people's, an' poor folks' rheumatiz ain't no easier than the gentry's."

"Well, it isn't my fault that the train's late," said Richard. "We'd better have the seat a bit forward, I think."

Richard's effects were put in at the back of the cart, Job grumbling all the time. "Jump in sharp," he said, when they were ready to start. "We don't want to be dawdling about here longer nor we can help."

Richard stood on the offside of the cart with his foot on the step. "I'm going to drive, Job," he said.

"Eh?" replied Job, looking down on him.

"Peggy's my pony; I'm going to drive her," said the boy.

"Oh, you can drive if you like," said Job, putting the reins into his hands and sidling over on to the other seat. "'Tis all one to me. Glad enough to keep my 'ands a bit warm."

They drove off across a sandy heath, stretching in ridge and hollow to right and left of them, its expanse broken here and there by clusters of seedling firs, and bounded by lines of the fast-budding forest trees in all gradations of blue and purple. Richard drew a deep breath of the familiar air, sweetened by mile upon mile of arborescence. "There's no place like the forest," he said.

Job eyed him askance, "Got tired ov t'other place, eh!" he remarked. "Or t'other place got tired o' you?"

Richard set his lips and made no reply.

"Well, it's what I expected," proceeded Job. "I warned yer. You can't never say you went away unwarned."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the boy. "Is father all right?"

"Hupset," replied Job, ironically. "Wonderful hupset."

Richard received this piece of information in silence. "Nat'rally," Job went on, "when the order was given to meet the train, unexpected like, I was fur going into the whys and wherefores. But he took me up sharp in his Christian-like way, and told me to mind me own business an' do what I was told. 'That's what I'm here for,' I says; 'but havin' the family welfare at 'eart I make so bold as to inquire whether anything's amiss with Master Richard,' I says. 'Master Richard will

answer to me for anything that's amiss,' says he, 'and not to you,' he says. 'And I hope 'e'll answer well,' I says, 'for there ain't too much justice to be 'ad when you're looking into things what displeases you.' He didn't say nothink further, but went indoors looking black, to write a sermon on brotherly love continuing, I make no doubt."

"You ought not to speak of my father in that way," said Richard.

"That's what he says hisself," replied Job. "'Tain't respectful. Them as earns respeck gets it, I says. Well, you won't find him in 'is most meek and mild sperrits, and so I warn ye. If you've been and done anything you didn't ought to 'ave, my advice to you is to own up and make the best of what you'll get. But, then, I dessay you 'aven't done nothing. I dessay the contrariness of others is accountable for what's happened. Not knowing what that is I can't say."

"And you won't be able to say," retorted Richard. "You'd better take father's advice and mind your own business."

"I'll know all in good time," replied Job, in no wise put out.

CHAPTER XI

THE TWO DISPLEASURES

THEY drove into the stable-yard. Richard handed the reins over to Job, jumped out of the cart, and walked towards the house.

"Hi, Master Richard!" Job called out after him. "Here's this here baggage." He took no notice, but walked straight in through the kitchen and the back premises and knocked at the door of his father's study. "Come in," said the Vicar's voice, and he entered, with his head well up, and stood to attention.

John Baldock was seated at his writing-table. He leant back in his chair and looked at his son with contracted brow. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked. "You were to have stayed with your aunt another fortnight. I get a telegram to say that she is sending you home by such and such a train. What have you done?"

"I didn't see Aunt Henrietta before I left," said Richard, "but I was told to give you this letter."

The Vicar took the envelope that was handed to him and laid it by his side. "I would rather hear first from you," he said.

"I don't know what I've done to be sent away in disgrace, father," said Richard. "But I did one thing I wish I hadn't, and I'll tell you about that. Aunt Henrietta was very kind to us—to me and Laurence Syde, the other boy I told you about in my letter—and got us ponies to ride and a cart, and gave us other

treats. And she told us two or three times to ask her if we wanted anything else. So I asked her if we might have guns to shoot rabbits with the keeper."

"Well!"

"That was all."

"What do you mean—all? She did not send you away for that, I suppose?"

"I don't know. That is the only thing I can think of. Except that I don't think she likes me."

"It was not at all a right thing to do, to ask for such an expensive present as a gun, and at your age you certainly ought to have asked my permission first to handle one. I am exceedingly displeased at what you tell me, but we will put that aside for the present and try to get at the bottom of things. You say that is all, but you do not tell me the result of your modest request."

"I meant that that was all I was ashamed of—asking for the guns."

"The guns! You did not ask for a pair, I suppose?"

"I asked for one for each of us."

"Did you ask alone, or did the other boy ask with you?"

"I asked alone."

"Then it was your suggestion that the request should be made?"

Richard hesitated for a moment. "No, father, it wasn't," he said. "He told me to ask, and said I must ask alone as I was a relation of Aunt Henrietta's and he wasn't."

"Then you put the blame on him. I don't think we are getting on very far, Richard. First of all you tell me you are ashamed of doing a certain thing, as you

ought to be. Then you shift the blame for it on to other's shoulders."

The boy looked his father straight in the face. "I didn't tell Aunt Henrietta a word of his asking me," he said. "And I haven't told anybody but you. I thought about it when I was in the train, and I made up my mind I would tell you everything exactly as it happened."

John Baldock looked steadily into his eyes for a space, and his look was returned. "You may tell me the rest in your own way," he said. "When did this happen?"

"Yesterday morning, after we had been out in the park with the keeper. Aunt Henrietta did not seem very well pleased when I asked her, but she sent into Sandley for the two guns and cartridges in the afternoon. Then Sir Franklin Syde came back from London in the evening, and I don't think he was pleased with Laurence for having the gun, but I don't know what he said or did. But at dinner they talked a lot about shooting this morning, and everything seemed all right, only they didn't talk much to me, and I was very sorry I had asked. And they didn't seem to want me, so I went away after dinner; and I haven't seen any of them since, because Mr. Bliss, the butler, called me early and told me I was to go home."

The Vicar considered these disclosures for a time and then took up Mrs. Moggeridge's missive and opened it. His face darkened as he read, and when he had finished he handed the letter to Richard. "This puts a very different light on the story," he said. "You had better read it for yourself."

Richard did so. The letter was dated on the previous day and ran as follows:—

"Dear John,—I am arranging that Richard shall be sent back to you to-morrow. I am much disappointed with the boy and can hardly believe that he is my own sister's child. His manners and appearance are rough, but that I could have got over. What I will *not* put up with is what I have learnt about him only an hour ago, and I never wish to see him again on account of it. I learn that he boasts *openly* that he is to succeed to my money after my death, which, in a boy of his age, seems to me quite unforgivable, let alone that he will *certainly do no such thing*. I might have hesitated to believe this of him had it not been told me by one whom I can *implicitly* trust and had I not myself had an instance of the way in which he regards me simply as a means of supplying himself with the amusements he desires. I am quite aware that the boy cannot have made up the story of his prospects after my no doubt *wished-for* death out of his own head. He must have been encouraged to dwell on the subject by *others*. I will say nothing further about that. What I do say is that his expectations in this respect are quite unfounded. I hope to live many years yet, and when I do come to die my property—which seems to excite such unworthy desires in the minds of those who profess very different ones (!)—will be disposed of in other directions. I say this now quite plainly so as to prevent further misconception. I am greatly disappointed in my nephew and do not wish to see anything further of him. Yours truly,

"HENRIETTA MOGGERIDGE."

As Richard slowly waded through the earlier sentences of this effusion, written in a bold and little legible hand—his face reddening as he took in their import—John Baldock stirred uneasily in his seat. "Give the letter to me," he said, "I will read over what concerns you," and he did so, coming to an end where Mrs. Moggeridge's pointed allusions to himself began. "Now

what truth is there in this?" he asked, when he had laid down the letter again. "Is it possible that you can have done such a shameful thing as to have boasted—what does she say?—‘boasts openly that he is to succeed to my money after my death’? What is the truth of that?"

"I told Laurence, father, what you told me, that Aunt Henrietta was going to send me to Rugby and to Oxford."

"That was a definite promise made to me, and is a very different thing."

"And he asked me something about Aunt Henrietta's money. I said ‘yes.’"

"What do you mean? Speak plainly, and don't prevaricate."

"I don't remember exactly what he said; it was something about leaving me her money, whether she was going to. And I said ‘yes.’"

"How could you have said such a thing? Who told you?"

"Sarah has talked a good deal about it, and Job; and I thought when you spoke to me about Rugby that you meant it too."

John Baldock was silent. "Really, father," pleaded Richard, "I didn't boast about it. He asked me, and I told him ‘yes’; but I've never thought much about it, as Aunt Henrietta makes out. I've only thought about going to Rugby, and you told me that."

"I know that," replied his father, impatiently. "You need not keep on saying so. You will not be blamed for anything that you have not done. Did you say anything to your aunt about Rugby?"

"Yes. I thanked her for sending me there."

"What did she say?"

"She seemed as if it was a new idea to her. I don't think she had thought about it lately."

"Did she—but no, I do not wish to cross-examine you as to her words. As to your telling this other boy in so many words that you were to succeed to your aunt's property—and the statement being repeated to her—I am not surprised that she should feel acute annoyance. I am deeply ashamed of your having done such a thing, and you should be deeply ashamed too. A boy of your age to have such things in his mind! She expresses herself strongly, but I do not know that she is not completely justified in what she says on the subject."

Richard was silent. His father looked at him again impatiently. "Well, have you nothing to say about it?" he snapped. "Don't you think you ought to feel ashamed?"

"I should if I had thought about it in that way, father," replied the boy. "But I never have. I have thought a great deal about going to Rugby, and a little about going to Oxford, and that is all."

John Baldock shifted in his seat with an exclamation of impatience. "You don't deny you told this other boy that your aunt was going to leave you her money," he said. "And you say that Sarah and Job told you so. It was an unwarrantable liberty on their part, if it is true. And you say that you understood it to be so from me. Most certainly I have never told you so."

"Didn't you think that she was going to do so, father?" asked Richard.

John Baldock's face darkened. "How dare you speak to me in that way!" he said. "I—I——" His

angry speech tailed off into silence. The two natures confronted one another, all accidents of relationship, of rulership on the one side, and dependence on the other, pushed for the moment aside. John Baldock saw his boy, not as the ductile child whom he could mould and sway to his own will, without heed to the factor of personality, but with the character that was none of his making already prompting him, the character which by and by must move him to oppose a strong, self-confident nature to a narrow, petulant one. He recognized in a flash the uprightness and dawning strength of the boy's nature, and with a twinge, the pettiness of his own attitude, seeking causes of offence so that he might satisfy his impulse to condemn and browbeat when he should have been sympathetic, fatherly, everything that it was most difficult for him to be.

And the boy saw it, too, as he stood before his father, the weak judge who might be propitiated, but could not do simple justice. In the light of the momentary revelation he put in the last word of his defence. "I thought you meant that, father," he said, "when you told me about Aunt Henrietta sending me to Rugby and Oxford, and you said that I should be rich afterwards. If I had thought about it in the way Aunt Henrietta thinks I have, I should not have said what I did to Laurence."

John Baldock roused himself to grasp again his authority, and the flash of mutual insight disappeared, but his tone was different as he replied: "I don't want to accuse you unjustly. Perhaps I did give you some reason for supposing—er—what you say. I admit that I thought—But never mind that. I—I—yes, I shall be going up to town—I mean that I will go up and see your aunt, and try to put this matter straight. It will

be the best way. You have not behaved well—I cannot say that. But——”

“Where do you think I haven’t behaved well, father?” asked Richard.

John Baldock’s face darkened again. “I think you forget yourself,” he said, “when you speak to me like that. In want of respect alone I think you show a marked deterioration since you left home. If you have learnt that in so short a time I can understand that your manners may not have been entirely pleasing to your aunt. And there is the asking for the gun. That I blame you for—strongly. You are not to suppose yourself a martyr.”

“I hoped, father, that if I told you everything you would not blame me very much,” said the boy. “I am very sorry if I have done wrong, but indeed I didn’t mean to. I think Aunt Henrietta is unkind to me, and that she doesn’t understand. Can’t you help me and put things right?”

“I am going to try to put things right, as far as I can. You can go away now. I will think over what is best to be done.”

Richard left the room without any further words. He was suffering under the keenest sense of injustice. He knew he had done nothing wrong, and realized dimly that there had been influences at work to bring him into disgrace other than his own actions. He had longed for his father’s sympathy, but knew now that he had never had much hope of obtaining it. He was old enough to recognize the fact that his father would rather condemn than acquit, and to feel bitter about it. He went out into the garden and through his old-time gap in the fence into the forest and wandered about for an hour. The familiar influences presently soothed him,

but as he returned to the garden he said to himself, "I have done nothing really wrong. I won't feel ashamed of myself. Father is not fair to me. If he had been kind and helped me I would have loved him always. He doesn't want me to love him, and he doesn't love me. I wish my mother had been alive. I think she wouldn't have treated me like that. There is no one at all who really cares for me." Then his childhood rose up and swamped his dawning adolescence, and he threw himself down under a great beech and cried bitterly at the thought of his loneliness and at the downfall of his hopes; for he thought he saw now that the disturbances in which he had become embroiled would end his bright visions of a school career at Rugby, and there was nothing to take their place but a round of lessons stretching away into future years under the unsympathetic oversight of his father.

While the boy was thus tasting the bitterness of a great disappointment, his father sat in his study turning over many things in his mind. He was dissatisfied with the news he had learnt of Mrs. Moggeridge's change of attitude, and he was dissatisfied with himself. To be quite satisfied with himself and his actions under any circumstance or crisis of life was a necessity to John Baldock. He called this state of mind being at peace with God. If anything happened to disturb it he looked very carefully into his conscience and spared no pains in tracking down the offence, which he sometimes found to be the result of behaviour of his own, but more frequently that of somebody else. Unfortunately, the limits of his nature not infrequently hindered the success of his search. He had no quick eye for integrity or beauty of character, was, indeed, blind to those qualities except when they bore the stamp of the religious creed

to which he adhered. He found it very difficult in this instance to give credit to his son for the open honesty of character which was plainly to be read on his face. The graces of the boy's nature were written in a script of which he had never sought the key. But the instinct of fatherhood, weak as it was, was not wholly lacking in him, and his uneasy self-communings were coloured by a sense of protection towards the child who had looked at him with a clear eye, and claimed help and support in his difficulty. He knew well enough that the boy was not to blame, nay, further, that he had behaved well in face of a situation complicated by circumstances he could not be supposed to understand. John Baldock thought he understood them himself very well. It happened that he knew something about Sir Franklin Syde, his family and his family affairs, through an accident of his former life; and he had no difficulty in supposing that, if he had succeeded in gaining the interest of a very rich woman in himself and his son, he would not be above working always in a quite gentlemanly, but subtle way to procure distaste and ultimate dismissal for one who might stand in the way of his designs. That was why he had made up his mind to confront him and, if he could do nothing else, at all events to open the eyes of his sister-in-law to the machinations of one whom he looked upon as an enemy.

When his mind turned itself to the consideration of this side of the question, and dwelt on what he regarded as the villainy of Sir Franklin Syde, the character of his son stood out in contrast innocent and honest. Why, then—the inquiry seemed to be sprung on him from outside his own consciousness—could he not have comforted the boy with sympathy and affection, in-

stead of playing the schoolmaster? The scene at his wife's death-bed rose once again to his memory, and that other almost forgotten picture of the five-year-old child sobbing in uncomforted trouble at his harshness. His spirit was stirred by a breath of the divine love which he preached about continually, but understood so little. He would not repeat his old mistakes. God helping him he wouldn't.

He rose from his seat and knelt by his table. Then he went out of the room and into the garden. Richard was crossing the lawn on his way to the house, disconsolate. His eyes were red. He looked up at his father and then down again. John Baldock put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "I have been thinking the matter over, Richard," he said. "I do not consider that you have been to blame. I withdraw my displeasure."

The words were spoken stiffly. Native churlishness plucked at the skirts of the angel of pity and spoiled the graciousness of the approach. But to the boy the healing quality of his father's words and halting unaccustomed caress came with infinite solace. Bitterness and disappointment were forgotten. He flung his arms around his father's neck in gratitude, and felt nearer to him than he had ever done before.

CHAPTER XII

A DISAPPOINTMENT

JOHN BALDOCK reached Sandley in the afternoon. He had not announced his arrival to Mrs. Moggeridge. He hired an open fly and drove out to Paradine Park. As he came out on to the brow of the hill from which the house could be seen lying below, he was aware of an upright, military-looking man and a handsome boy riding up the slope of grass to his right. They were some distance off, but he saw Sir Franklin Syde turn in his saddle and gaze at him from under bent eyebrows. "My clothes will tell him who I am," said John Baldock to himself. "I shall not be allowed to be very long alone with Henrietta."

Mrs. Moggeridge was in, and he was shown by Mr. Bliss straight into her boudoir. He did not realize that this was an unusual proceeding for which the demure and respectful butler would be afterwards severely reprimanded, or he might have wondered why that functionary should have departed from his usual course and thus procured him the certainty of an interview with his mistress unhampered by the presence of others.

Mrs. Moggeridge showed considerable surprise upon his announcement. She was writing at her desk with her back to the door and had only time to turn round before Mr. Bliss had stated the visitor's name and left the room.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, rising from her seat. "This is unexpected. Bliss does not usually show visitors into this room. Pray sit down, John. I will

not pretend that your visit gives me any very great pleasure. Nor do I suppose you come with any very pleasant intention. So we need not pretend to be overjoyed to see one another. I dislike pretence."

She spoke quickly, almost breathlessly, as if she were labouring under some excitement and were anxious to gain time to collect her thoughts. John Baldock took the seat to which she had motioned him, and waited until she had finished.

"I have certain things to explain, Henrietta," he said, "and when I have explained them I will ask for explanations from you."

"Now let us understand each other at once," interrupted Mrs. Moggeridge. "I had Richard here because I thought if he were a nice well-mannered well-brought-up boy and pleased me I would do something for him in the future. I admit that. But he is *not* a nice boy; he is *not* well mannered; he is *not* well behaved; and he does *not* please me. No obligation rests on me to do anything for him if I do not choose. No obligation at all. I do *not* choose, and that ends the matter."

"I beg your pardon," returned John Baldock, "it does not end the matter. You have treated my boy with great unfairness and great harshness, and——"

"Harshness!" snapped Mrs. Moggeridge with a short laugh. "An accusation of harshness comes strangely from the husband of my sister."

A dark flush spread itself over John Baldock's face, but it was the only sign that her words had told. "Nevertheless the accusation is made," he said. "You say in so many words—it is in the letter you wrote to me—that Richard boasted that he was to succeed to your property."

"I do say so. And I think it a shameful thing in so young a boy. But I also said in my letter that this idea must have been put into his head before it could have come out. And I will say as plainly as you like that I think it a still more shameful thing that you—yes, *you*—should have encouraged him to look forward to my death and to covet my money." She spoke with great heat, and John Baldock felt the hopeless twinge of the more or less logical male confronted by an angry, inconsequent woman.

"If you will listen to me for a moment," he said, "I will try to put the matter before you in a true light. You did promise *me* very definitely that you would undertake the boy's education. You even mentioned the school and the college to which you would send him—those at which your father, and my wife's, was educated. You promised in a general way other things which you have not taken much trouble to carry out, for you let thirteen years go by without caring to see the boy. I know you are unreliable in character——"

"Thank you," interpolated Mrs. Moggeridge.

"—and that you very readily make promises that you do not afterwards take the trouble to perform. But this particular promise was so definite that I own it has never once occurred to me in all these years to doubt that it would be carried out. I have educated the boy myself most carefully, with the idea of his taking full advantage of his opportunities, and when the time approached for him to go to school, naturally, I talked to him about it and urged him to do his best."

"I dare say I may have held out some such hopes; but, good gracious me, haven't you got sense enough to see that whatever I said years ago was contingent on

the boy's turning out well? Am I to be pinned down to words carelessly spoken years ago in a moment, perhaps, of expansiveness?—I know I am expansive; some people are kind enough to call it generosity—when I find that the boy has not turned out well, that he is grasping, and calculating——”

The temper of both having now become heated, either contestant was seldom henceforth permitted to end a speech or a sentence without interruption from the other.

“Richard is not grasping nor calculating,” interrupted John Baldock. “No one whose judgment was not warped by prejudice could say that of him. The boy has his faults——”

“Many of them.”

“His lack of definite religious aspirations sometimes causes me uneasiness——”

“Religious fiddlesticks!”

“But I have closely examined him, and I say most definitely that he has cherished no such unworthy desires as you have credited him with. He is incapable of them. He is far too young for one thing to think about money and worldly advantages. Such things are——”

“But he *does* think about such things. He told Laurence Syde that my money would be his after my death.”

“In answer to a question. The other boy has his eyes fully open to the things of this world, I can well believe.”

“What do you know about Laurence? Nothing at all. He is a most attractive and open-natured boy. I suppose Richard has been trying to shift the blame of his disgrace upon Laurence's shoulders.”

"He has not. He has been generous in shielding him. I tell you, Henrietta, you are doing my boy and your sister's child a very grave injustice. I am well aware that you dislike me. You do not understand me or the motives that sway my actions. I am indifferent to dislike for my own sake, but for that of the sister you professed to love."

"I will not listen to you on such a subject. You well knew that I loved her dearly, and I cherish her memory; but *you*, John Baldock, now seem to me to have very little to do with her. I look upon her short married life as an episode. The fact is I do not recognize Richard as her child. He seems to me to be entirely yours, and as you say, and I do not mind repeating, I have very little regard or even respect for you. But why prolong this very unpleasant interview? I have made up my mind, and nothing *you* can say is likely to alter it. I——"

"I prolong the interview, as unpleasant to me as it is to you, because I, too, have made up my mind. I hold you to your promise, at least as far as providing Richard with an education is concerned."

"If that had been all there need have been no difficulty. But having had my eyes opened to what is really expected of me——"

"That *is* all—absolutely all. I make no further claims upon you. I never have made claims; although, mind this, you did hold out distinct hopes—more than hopes, expectations—that you were going to make the boy your heir."

"And I dare say I should have done so if I had been pleased with him."

"Or if you had not come across others, in your unreliability, who for the moment pleased you better."

“You take a very strange tone, considering you come here as a suppliant for my bounty.”

“I do no such thing. You may do what you like with your money. You have gone back upon the promises—for they amounted to promises—you made with regard to it. You will not again be reminded of them from me, and you can settle with your own conscience the question of your behaviour in that respect. But the education stands on another footing. It was an explicit undertaking, and you have no right now to repudiate it as a whim. It means much for the boy’s future, and it would be a wicked thing to deprive him of it.”

Mrs. Moggeridge had made several attempts to interrupt this speech, but John Baldock, with raised voice and masterful mien, had persisted in it to the end. As he finished, and she was about to reply, the door of the room opened and Sir Franklin Syde entered. He was spruce and cool, in his riding clothes; and, as he gazed inquiringly at the clergyman in his shabby black suit, his face flushed with the excitement of conflict, and then at Mrs. Moggeridge, hardly less excited, he gained all the advantage of contrast, and appeared to John Baldock a formidable adversary.

The Vicar stood up instantly. “I know Sir Franklin Syde,” he said, “though he does not know me. Before I went to Beechurst I held a small living at Lindseydale, in Yorkshire, and the patron of the living was Mr. Delmar, who at one time had served in the same regiment as Sir Franklin.”

Sir Franklin sat down with elaborate unconcern. He turned his face away from Mrs. Moggeridge as he did so, but John Baldock saw that it was not undisturbed.

“I knew Delmar,” he said, “when I was a captain

and he a subaltern. We had not met for many years."

"You were not likely to. Mr. Delmar died a lonely man. He had lived the life of a recluse for years. And he looked upon you as the cause of his loneliness."

Sir Franklin addressed himself to Mrs. Moggeridge. "The object of all this," he said, with an air of courtesy and frankness, "is to create prejudice against me. The fact of the matter is that Mr. Delmar and myself were both suitors of the same lady. She married me, and I believe that Delmar's disappointment was so great that he never forgave me for my success."

"I cannot see," said Mrs. Moggeridge, "what this has to do with me, or why the subject is brought up at all."

"It is brought up to create prejudice," repeated Sir Franklin.

"It is brought up," said John Baldock, "to show you, Henrietta, the kind of man it is for whose sake you are throwing over your own kin. Sir Franklin's statement is not a straightforward one. He——"

Sir Franklin rose from his seat. "I do not allow any man to use an expression of that sort in my presence," he said, very quietly.

John Baldock took no notice of him. "You can judge for yourself, Henrietta," he said. "Mr. Delmar was actually engaged to the lady who became Sir Franklin Syde's wife, and they were within a week of their marriage. Sir Franklin persuaded her to throw Mr. Delmar over, and she did so. She was rich."

"Mr. Baldock," said Sir Franklin, still very quietly, "you may either leave the room at once of your own accord, or I will ring for somebody to turn you out. The choice is your own."

Timidity played little part in John Baldock's char-

acter, but the elaborate unconcern of his enemy very nearly had its intended effect. Perhaps it was too elaborate. At any rate, after a moment's hesitation, during which he half rose from his seat, he threw off the impression made by Sir Franklin's manner, and said: "My business is with my sister-in-law. I don't know, sir, by what right you take upon yourself to order me out of her house."

"I will tell you, Mr. Baldock," replied Sir Franklin. "Mrs. Moggeridge has promised to be my wife. She has given me the right to protect her against the annoyance caused her by men like yourself, who wish to take advantage of her generosity for their own selfish purposes."

The effect of this statement was as marked as Sir Franklin could have wished. It was entirely unexpected. John Baldock leant back in his chair, and stared at the speaker and then at his sister-in-law.

Mrs. Moggeridge turned away in some confusion. "I did not wish the statement to be made just yet, Franklin," she said.

"It is necessary, Henrietta," said Sir Franklin. "You will never be rid of the designs and calculations of Mr. Baldock as long as you have only yourself to rely on."

Then John Baldock found his tongue. "Designs and calculations!" he echoed, scornfully. "So that is why my boy has been pushed aside, elbowed out of the way in case he should interfere with your precious schemes! Henrietta, are you quite blind? Can't you see why this man who acted so basely in his first marriage—a notorious spendthrift, almost a bankrupt—seeks marriage with you? Do you really think that it is for love of you—a middle-aged woman? Can't you see that it is

your money that attracts him, and that he will stoop to any contrivance to gain his end? ”

Mrs. Moggeridge, until the fact of her age was brought to her notice, had looked distressed during this outburst. She was now simply angry and was about to break forth into speech, but Sir Franklin detained her. “ I can understand Mr. Baldock’s annoyance,” he said. “ It may serve as an excuse for his insolence. But he will now leave the room and the house without further ado.” He walked to the fireplace and rang the bell, and then to the door, which he opened invitingly.

“ I am going,” said John Baldock. “ I never wish to enter this house again, or to have anything further to do with you, Henrietta Moggeridge. You are a selfish, deluded woman. Prosperity has been your undoing, for you had impulses towards goodness. Now they are choked out of existence, and you are on the path to perdition. You have behaved cruelly and unjustly towards your dead sister’s child, and I pray that you may live to repent it. As for your future husband, you will live to despise him. For all his brave outward show he is corrupt through and through, and it will be part of your punishment to find it out for yourself.”

Mr. Bliss had come to the door and listened respectfully to the latter part of this harangue, which Sir Franklin also received without flinching. “ Show this gentleman to the door,” he said, when John Baldock had finished, “ and do not admit him into the house again.”

“ Very good, Sir Franklin,” replied Mr. Bliss, and showed the visitor out without the slightest sign that he had noticed anything unusual in his method of leave-taking.

John Baldock walked away from the house angry and

disturbed. He did not remember that the fly that had brought him from the station was in the stable-yard awaiting his return journey. He walked for nearly a mile, immersed in his angry thoughts, until he had passed the swan pond and was nearing the lodge gates. Then he heard wheels behind him, and looked back to see the till now forgotten vehicle he had hired following him. The driver pulled up when he reached him, the door opened and his sister-in-law's butler stepped out and approached him.

"Excuse me, sir," said Mr. Bliss, taking off his hat. "I have taken the liberty of telling the flyman to wait until I have had a few words with you. I was unable to speak to you in the house. My position does not admit of it. But I had the honour of Master Richard's acquaintanceship away from professional duties, and if I may make so bold I should like to say that everyone in the house was greatly taken with the young gentleman and wishes him well."

John Baldock stared at the butler as if he were at a complete loss to understand his speech, which was indeed the case. He gave a short, unpleasant laugh when the speech was ended. "Everybody in the house by no means wishes him well," he said.

"I took the liberty of referring, sir, to those holding what is usually called a menial position in the household," replied Mr. Bliss. "His attitude towards the domestics of the establishment was that of a well-bred and courteous young gentleman, and naturally it was appreciated. My position prevents me alluding in so many words to what may or may not have been observed during the discharge of duties incumbent on me, but out here, perhaps, I may be allowed to say, as a man who is acquainted with manners of the highest,

that Master Richard would adorn any position, and regrettable misunderstandings—I can't go any farther than that under present circumstances—alone prevented his agreeableness and value being appreciated where it might have been hoped that thus it would be."

John Baldock appeared somewhat at a loss during the delivery of this address. Mr. Bliss, a man of delicate perceptions, probably grasped the fact that his object would best be gained by leaving the matter where it stood. He allowed no time for a reply. "I will not detain you longer, sir," he said. "I hope you will pardon the liberty I am taking in acquainting you with the general appreciation and admiration aroused by Master Richard. In the name of the household of Paradise Park I wish him success and happiness wherever he may be. Good afternoon, sir."

Mr. Bliss raised his hat again, turned on his heel, and walked back the way he had come. John Baldock entered the carriage and drove to the station. Richard's friend, the butler, had succeeded in removing from his mind the last trace of any feeling he may have entertained that his son was in any way responsible for the change that had come over his own fortunes.

That change was a hard blow to Richard. His father and he talked over the matter in the Vicar's study after his return from his fruitless expedition. They were closer together in spirit that evening than they had ever been before, and it was some consolation to the boy in his disappointment to feel that he had his father's confidence.

"Your aunt will do nothing for you," John Baldock told him. "She is going to marry Sir Franklin Syde, and will have other interests. You may put all thoughts of her from your mind, as I have done. We will speak

of her no more. You understand that it is impossible for me to send you to Rugby. I cannot afford it. You must not let the disappointment weigh too heavily with you. Fortunately it is possible for you to have a good classical education elsewhere. I have been thinking over the matter seriously on my journey down. I shall send you next term to the Grammar School at Storbridge. You will ride to and fro every day. I have prepared you well for school life, and you ought to take a good position there. You must do your very best to keep it. No doubt this disappointment is sent us for our good. My ambition for you is that you shall grow up a holy man and do God's work in the world. You can do that, as I have told you before, in whatever position in life you occupy, but you get the fullest opportunities by taking Orders in the Church. I wish you to set that end in view and work towards it. The way is plain for the next ten years or so. There is an exhibition to be obtained from Storbridge Grammar School which will help you at the University. You must work for that from the beginning, and I will help you to the best of my power. You will also try for a college scholarship or exhibition, and I shall put by as much money as I can afford so that you may be able to live at Oxford or Cambridge for four years without anxiety, and take a good degree—if that be God's will. Your duty now lies plain before you, and I hope that you will be enabled to do it."

Richard thought that he would, and said so. His spirits rose somewhat as a definite scheme of life was put before him. Storbridge would not be so good as Rugby, but he thought he might like to go there. As for taking Orders, he had no particular objection to that course. The mental constitution of a boy of thirteen

seldom impels him to look forward as far as ten years ahead. So he went to bed late that night, his mind relieved of the weight that had recently oppressed it, and cheered by the thought of going to school in a few weeks' time.

CHAPTER XIII

RICHARD MEETS AN OLD FRIEND

ON the borders of the forest some seven miles from the village of Beechurst slept the old town of Storbridge, placidly, like a veteran in the evening of life who takes his well-earned ease after long years of activity, and with contentment, still possessed of time-worn honour. The clash of ecclesiastical strifes had echoed round the great pile of its monastic church, now shorn of its dependencies. Its bridges of solid masonry had rung to the tramp of armed men and horses, and its narrow streets had seen many a desperate combat. But now all effort and conflict passed it by. The church stood on a slight rise, and could be seen for miles across the low-lying country, intersected by broad gliding rivers which encircled the rich water meadows and flowed by sleepy villages, woods, and parks. Round the church was grouped the little town, retaining much the same aspect as it had worn for a hundred years past, except that now and then an old house had been pulled down to make way for a modern one, or a carved and timbered front had been ruthlessly refaced according to Victorian ideas of architectural propriety. There was no station within four miles of Storbridge, and it had lived to see towns of half its old-time importance, revived through the arteries of locomotion, surpassing it in population and activity by many times. There was an old and dwindling market, one or two quite unimportant manufactures, a great inn exercising a mere

fraction of its ancient hospitalities, a few old-fashioned shops still resorted to in a spirit of conservatism by the surrounding gentry and farmers, and an old endowed school occupying what was left of the monastic buildings.

It was to this school that Richard Baldock was sent when his cherished hopes of Rugby were overthrown. The fees were of the smallest, and the education on sound classical lines of the best. There are many such schools scattered about the country. They form an invaluable stepping-stone to the honours of the Universities and the learned professions, and almost alone among scholastic foundations rebut the accusation that opportunities provided by the beneficence of past ages for the poor have been appropriated by the rich. Each of these little-known country schools has its roll of honour, and cherishes the name of a bishop or a judge or a soldier or a world-famed scholar, and to every poor parson's or farmer's son among its scholars is held out the opportunity of a career in the world.

On every weekday except Saturday, wet or fine, Richard rode the seven miles between Beechurst and Storbridge, stabled his pony and went into chapel at nine o'clock, and every afternoon, when school was over, rode home again and spent the rest of his day preparing lessons for the morrow under the watchful eye of his father. The school was small, educating not more than fifty or sixty boys, and the farmers' and tradesmen's sons who formed the bulk of its society, and were mostly removed at the age of sixteen or seventeen, were not for the most part distinguished by the extreme activity of intellect. He got into the Sixth Form after he had been there two years; and there seemed little doubt but that he would take the school exhibition, when

he came to be of an age to go to Oxford, and probably a college scholarship or exhibition as well, for although his parts were not brilliant he was a good worker and was moving steadily along the beaten track.

The bitter disappointment he had felt when his expectations of a career at a big public school were frustrated soon wore away, and his life was a happy one. He was able to take very little part in the games of his schoolfellows, but these were not of such importance in the life of the Storbridge schoolboys as is usual, for many of them, like himself, came from a distance, although none so far; and there was a general inclination among the boys rather more towards the interests of field and forest and river, than to cricket and football.

Two years went over Richard's head quietly and happily. No life could have been healthier than that he was leading. He was a mass of hard muscle, active, almost tireless. With his clear eye, sunburnt skin and crisp curly hair, he was a picture of boyhood. Everybody loved him for his open sunny disposition, in which there was no trace of meanness or selfishness. Even his father, harsh and captious as he was by nature and bound rigidly by the tenets of his creed, softened towards him and found himself the better man for it. Richard had put himself on a new footing with old Sarah, who, if she could have had her way, would have gone on bullying and scolding him to the end of the chapter. He half chaffed and half petted her, laughed heartily at her awful threats of future doom, and put more humanity into her stony old heart than it had ever sheltered before. She loved him dearly, although she did not know it. Job was his crony and did his bidding, which was more than he had ever done for his lawful

master. And he was the friend of every villager in Beechurst, from the oldest to the youngest, and knew them and their thoughts and ways not as a gentleman knows his inferiors in station, but as they were known to their familiars.

Mrs. Meaking still maintained her gentility by means of her school and her dressmaking, but the once truculent Montague or Pug had not been seen in Beechurst since about the time that Richard had begun to go over to Storbridge to school. His whereabouts was something of a mystery, which Mrs. Meaking sought to wrest to her own advantage by telling tales of his effulgent prosperity, tales which varied in detail but only increased in splendour as the months went by. He was on a visit to a relation of her own, whose status grew from comparatively unimposing beginnings to one of extreme wealth and importance. There were now beginning to be hints that he was a member of the peerage and had adopted Montague as a convenient way of disposing of his title when he should no longer be in a position to require it himself. The facts of the case, which were perfectly well known to the inhabitants of Beechurst generally, were that Pug Meaking had left home early one morning after an acrid discussion overnight with his mother, and had never been heard of since.

There was in the main street of Storbridge—a narrow street with cobbled paving, which wound irregularly down to the river from the square in which stood the church and the old buildings of the grammar school—an old-fashioned bookseller's shop, somewhat more important than a visitor might have expected to find in such a town as Storbridge. The shop, which bore on its front the name of Gannett, was on the ground floor

of one of the ancient half-timbered houses of which a few still stood among the more modern fronts and houses of the town. In its dim recesses could be seen walls lined with books from floor to ceiling—books on counters and tables, books on the floor, books stacked untidily in the oval window, and at such a height as seriously to interfere with the purpose for which windows are designed. Books overflowed on to the pavement, and were housed in rough shelves, and in a sort of horse-trough which ran along the front of the shop and filled in either side of the doorway. In the midst of all this heaped-up materialization of the thoughts of many minds, ancient and modern, wise and foolish, moved an old withered man, dusty and ill-dressed, with a high forehead overhanging keen deep-set eyes, a long grey beard, and thin nervous hands, with finger-tips which, although none of the cleanest, were delicately formed. This was Mr. Gannett, known to every book-collector in England for his bibliographical knowledge and for the deep interest which could be extracted from the catalogues sent out by him with some irregularity, but on an average about twice a year.

Mr. Gannett, wide as was his fame, was without much honour in the town of Storbridge. A few of the surrounding clergy and landowners whose tastes lay in that direction would come into his shop to buy or to talk books, but that was about the extent of his social intercourse with his neighbours. He lived quite alone in two rooms over his shop. An old woman came in every day to attend to his meagre bodily wants, and left him to himself at nightfall. Sometimes she did a little cleaning, but as her excursions with soap and water irritated Mr. Gannett exceedingly, there seemed no particular reason why she should put him and her-

self out in this respect, and she did so only when her shrivelled household conscience cried an imperative bidding. No neighbour ever disturbed the old bookseller's solitude after the shutters of his shop were put up for the night, and he was popularly supposed to spend his evenings in feeding with his books not only his brain, but his body. His bugbears were the town boys, who played all manner of pranks on him, and even Richard's schoolfellows at the grammar school were not always above committing little pleasantries with him, such as mixing his more expensive books with the outcasts in the penny trough, and acting generally in a way which pleased their small sense of humour as much as it enraged the bookseller.

At the age of fifteen Richard was beginning to nibble at books, sometimes laid out a few of his scanty coppers in Mr Gannett's shop, and found himself frequently drawn towards an inspection of his stock. One day, after morning school, he was turning over the books in the penny trough, with his back towards the doorway, when he was astonished to feel a hand on his collar and himself swung out into the roadway, while a voice, which was not that of Mr. Gannett, said, "You just be off out o' that. There'll be no more o' your grammar-grubs' pranks played here." Grammar-grub, it may be explained, was an opprobrious term for the scholars of Storbridge School, used by the town boys when they were in sufficient force to enable them to do so without fear of effective retaliation.

Richard was turning round with an injured face, prepared strongly to resent the undeserved imputation put upon him, when his look changed. "What, Pug Meaking!" he exclaimed, at the same time as his aggressor said, "Master Baldock, I beg your pardon, sir,

but I have just turned two of them off for playing monkey tricks, and I thought you were another."

"I was only looking at the books," said Richard, his wrath vaporized into astonishment. "Whatever are you doing here, and where have you been these two years?"

"I've come as Mr. Gannett's assistant, sir," said Meaking, "and I've been earning my living in London."

"Don't call me sir," said Richard; "I'm just the same as I was. Tell us all about it. Everybody's wanted to know what had become of you."

Meaking looked up and down the street and behind him into the shop where Mr. Gannett was buried amongst a pile of books on a desk busily engaged in preparing one of his famous catalogues, and oblivious to outside influences.

"Come upstairs," he said. "It's dinner-time, and there won't be anybody in."

They passed through the shop, the old man taking no sort of notice of them. "Do you live here?" asked Richard, as they made their way up the steep staircase to the second floor.

"Yes," said Meaking, and led the way into a barely furnished room with latticed window looking on to the street. The room, unlike the rest of those in the house, was neat, and bore signs of having been recently well scrubbed. Richard gazed round him in surprise. "Fancy finding a room like this in old Goose's house!" he said. "They say he only washes himself once a year, on Christmas Eve, and as for his house——!"

"I did it myself before I went to bed last night," said Meaking. "I only came yesterday afternoon, but I'm not going to live in filth. And I tell you, Master Bal-

dock, I'm going to turn this old house inside out and the business too."

"Well, let's hear all about it from the beginning. Then you haven't been adopted by a nobleman who is going to leave you his title and a large fortune?"

An expression of impatient disgust passed across the young man's face. "That's the sort of nonsense that's put about, is it?" he said. "I might have known it. I'll tell you what it is, Master Baldock—well, then, Dick, and I'm pleased to see you haven't learnt to put on any airs, which I'll do you the justice to say you never did in the old days—it was to get rid of all that that I ran away. I couldn't put up with it no longer. Mind, I'm not saying anything against mother and don't want to. She's got her ways of looking at things and I've got mine, and my way isn't her way. I didn't want to be brought up genteel. I wanted to do something for myself, and get on in the world. It'll be time enough to be genteel when I've made a bit of money. Until then I've got too much to do to worry about gentility. I've got to work, and whether I work with my head or my hands it's all one to me, as long as I'm getting on. I'd listened to such a lot of blat—mind you, I'm not saying anything against mother—about gentility and what I might do and what I mightn't do, which seemed to end in doing nothing at all, that one night it suddenly struck me that I'd had enough of it. Don't waste time in doing what you mean to do when you've made up your mind to do it, is one of my mottoes, so the next morning I cleared out with a bundle of clothes and what I'd got in my money-box and walked to London. When I got there I made up my mind I'd take the first job that offered and stick to it if I saw my way to rising and if not find another.

I struck it first time. That was luck, but luck's the bird and pluck's the cage that catches it, and you don't keep the bird if you haven't got the cage to put it in. That's one of my mottoes. I make 'em up and put 'em in a book, and one day I'll print it.

"Well, I found a job in a big bookseller's shop. It was to sweep and dust and put up the shutters and run errands and so on, but it wasn't that for long. I did the work I was set to, and as much more as I could lay my hands to, and whenever I saw a chance of nicking in and serving a customer you bet I took it. The other assistants were only too glad to shove off some of their work on me. They weren't anxious to do any more than they were obliged, and I was taking all I could get. Of course I got the first vacant place when one of them left, and I learnt all I could and did all I could. I didn't think about amusing myself, I thought all the time about my work, and I even saved a bit of money. When I left the other day, after two years, they offered to increase my screw by half if I'd stay; and if I had stayed I should have been manager in no time, and a partner sooner or later. There was nothing could have stopped me."

"Why didn't you stay?" inquired Richard, not unnaturally.

Meaking's florid, self-confident face took on a softer look. "I don't mind telling *you*," he said, "though it mustn't go any further. It was chiefly the forest. I found I wanted it. I was all right in London in the day time doing my work, and at night when I'd got something else to do, such as learning book-keeping and so on, but in the summer evenings and on Sundays it was awful. I hadn't got any friends, and I wasn't going to waste time and money over amusements. I tell you,

Dick Baldock, I've sometimes sat at my window and almost cried at the thought of the forest, and all the times we used to have there. I've often thought of you, and wished I could see you again, and of all the rest of the people at Beechurst one by one, and of course of mother, and I thought perhaps I hadn't ought to have left her like that, and never let her know what I was doing. So at last it came so as I couldn't put up with it any longer, and I made up my mind to come back, though I wouldn't go to Beechurst and live on her till I'd got something to do, not for a single day I wouldn't."

"You're quite a changed character, Pug," said Richard. "I'd never have thought you'd have taken to work like you say. You used not to be like that."

"That's where you make a mistake," replied Meaking. "Most of my thoughts was taken up with play when you knew me, but you never knew me slack about play or anything but pushing on, whatever I might have been doing."

Richard laughed. "That's true enough," he said. "But fancy your taking to books! I remember you saying you'd never look inside another if you could help it."

"No more I do," answered Meaking, coolly, "except perhaps a title-page. If I ever find reading books helps me to sell them I'll read every book that's published, but I haven't found the necessity of it yet and don't expect to."

"And how did you hit upon Goosey-Gannett?" asked Richard. "You haven't told me that yet."

"Look here, Baldock, just oblige me by giving the proprietor of this business his proper name. I shall

have a share in it some day, and I don't wish it to be miscalled."

"Right you are. But you seem to have fixed things up pretty quickly if you only got here twelve hours or so ago."

"It didn't take me twelve hours to fix that up. I did it before I started. When I was casting about how I could get back to the forest and make use of the business knowledge I'd already got, I thought of this shop, and I knew it was the very thing for me. It's got a name already, and I'm the man to get it a bigger one. There's lots of room for development here, and it'll be some years before I've developed it up to what I consider its limits. When I do I'll look about for something else, but in the meantime I'll stay here doing work I like in a place I like."

"And how did you get old Goo—old Gannett to take you on? Was that luck?"

"No. That was the other thing. I brought my box here from the station and put it down just inside the door. I told him I knew he wanted an assistant, and mentioned the place where I had been trained. He said he hadn't an idea of taking an assistant, the shop boy was as much as he wanted to worry him; and he often thought of getting rid of him and doing his work himself. I said he could get rid of him as soon as he liked. I would do the work and I'd save him a lot of trouble in the departments of the business he didn't care about. I got at him there. I thought I should. He likes pottering about among books, but as for selling 'em he's no more idea of it than a baby. He doesn't want to sell them. It's my belief he'd rather not. However, it wasn't anything I said particularly that made him take me on. It was the way I said it. I'd determined to get

into the business, and it 'ud have taken a more wide-awake man than him to stop me. I fixed it upon my own terms—I put 'em low enough at first—sacked the boy—I don't mind doing his work for a bit—and was in the place before he knew he'd engaged me. He's more comfortable in his mind already. He's got nothing to do now but make up his catalogue. I've taken all the rest off his shoulders. Oh, I tell you, Dick Baldock, I know how to get my own way and to make use of it when I've got it."

Richard had stared at him open-mouthed during the progress of his story, fascinated by this recital of self-confident enterprise. "I'm sure I hope you'll make a success of it, Pug," he said.

"Thank you," said Meaking. "But we'll have no more Pugs, if you please, Baldock. Nor Montagues either. I've got past the one and I've not worked up to the other yet, though I shall in time. Montague Augustus John was the names mother thought of when I was christened, and many a kick I've had for them in the old days, as you know. I've chucked the first two overboard for the present, not having any use for 'em, and I'm plain John Meaking now. Don't you forget it, please. Mr. Meaking to the customers, Meaking to my superiors, what there are of them, and there won't be many in a few years' time, and John to my friends. I don't wish to shove myself on to you, Master Baldock, for you're a gentleman born, and above me—at present. But I always liked you, and John's at your service if you like to make use of it. Otherwise it's Meaking. I don't insist upon the Mr. from you."

"It shall be John," said Richard. "And I'm Dick—not Dickie. I'll come and see you often and talk

about the forest and about books. I like books, and I'm getting to like them more and more."

"You can't come too often for me," returned Mr. Meaking. "I'm very pleased to see you again."

"And I'm pleased to see you," said Richard, upon which they ratified their renewed friendship with a shake of the hand and parted.

CHAPTER XIV

MEAKING COMES HOME

OLD Sarah Wellbeloved, now considerably over seventy, still retained her position at Beechurst Vicarage. She and a young woman from the village, vice Martha, the afflicted cook, now deceased, divided the work of the house between them, and Sarah claimed, not without reason, that she was as useful, in spite of advancing years, as when she had first joined the household of John Baldock's father well over fifty years before. Her spare, diminutive frame, never overweighted with the generous juices of life, retained its wiry activity. She was rather more bent and withered, and her hair was thinner and whiter, but she was the same Sarah, truculently religious and minatory, as she had been fifteen years ago, when she had first inoculated her charge with a respect for Holy Writ, as such, and an enlivening curiosity on the subjects of Heaven and Hell. The nursery in which she and Richard had sat together during his childhood was still his chief haunt. He did his lessons in his father's study, but kept his more cherished possessions in the room upstairs, and retired there during such of his leisure hours as he did not spend out of doors.

One Friday evening, a few days after his encounter with the youth whom, in deference to his own clearly expressed wishes, we must now call John Meaking, Richard was sitting by the nursery fire, while Sarah plied a busy needle, as of old. He had finished the

preparation of his lessons for Monday, and was now on his way to bed. It was the happiest hour of his week, for he had a glorious day's holiday to look forward to, and nothing on his mind to prevent the full enjoyment of it. It was at this time that his spirits, never particularly low, ran to the height which made him desirous of teasing somebody, and old Sarah, in her dry secretive way, also rather enjoyed the passage of arms into which she was regularly inveigled on Friday evenings.

"Ah!" began Richard on this particular evening, hugging a worsted-stockinged knee and turning a mischievous face upon the old woman: "I've got a piece of news that you'd give a good deal to hear."

"If you've got a piece of news," returned Sarah, "I shall hear it soon enough for my comfort. You never kep' nothing to yourself yet, an' couldn't if you tried."

"Well, I think I'll keep this to myself, after all. I don't suppose Mrs. Meaking would really care for you to hear it before she does."

"Eh?" inquired Sarah, looking up at him through her spectacles. "What's that about Mrs. Meaking?"

"I said Mrs. Meaking ought to know of it first."

"Know of what?"

"What I've found out."

"Now, Master Richard, don't you go for to be aggravating. If you got something to tell me that I ought to know, you just tell it straight out."

"I never said you ought to know it. I said you'd like to."

"Well, of all the——"

"Now don't get angry. Anger is a wicked passion,

sent to us to resist, you know. You often used to tell me that."

"Yes, and I'll tell it you again. Precious few's the wicked passions *you* resist. You're a despiser of grace, and given over to 'em. Ah, and you'll get your reward by and by, unless you find peace full and free. You mark my words. There'll be a deal hotter fire where you'll go if you're not careful nor the one you're a settin' at now."

"It couldn't be much hotter, because the worms couldn't live in it. There *will* be worms, won't there? I think you said worms."

"Yes, I did say worms. And why did I say worms? 'Cos Revelations said worms afore me; and I suppose he knowed. So there, Master Clever! And don't you go a scoffing at what's in the Holy Bible, or I'll acquaint your Pa."

"I'm not scoffing. I like worms. But you always were an old tale-bearer."

"Now, Master Richard, that I never was nor never will be, and well you know it, not requiring so to do, but well able to reprove evil myself when I see it—a saved sinner this fifty years."

"Oh, you were a sinner, were you? I didn't know you'd ever been a sinner. What fun you must have had!"

Old Sarah held up pious hands of horror. "To think," she exclaimed, "that I should live to hear such talk, and from one I've done my best to bring up in godly ways, and scourge the devil out of!"

"Oh, you scourged *him* out long ago. I shouldn't think he'd ever want to look at the back of a hair brush again. I say, Sarah, do you think curiosity is a sin?"

"Loose talk is," retorted Sarah, "and a wicked one, as I've told you many a time. You know where you'll go if——"

"Oh, yes, I know that all right. But I suppose when you were really a sinner, fifty years or so ago, you couldn't have rested till you'd found out what I know."

"I don't know what I should have done then—up and boxed your ears, very likely. But what'll happen now is you'll go straight off to bed unless there's anything you want to tell me. It's past nine o'clock."

"Perhaps I'd better go, then. I am rather sleepy, and I shall have to get up early to-morrow."

Richard yawned and stretched himself, and made a feint of rising from his seat. But he kept an eye on old Sarah, who stitched on unconcernedly.

"I s'pose it's something about that good-for-nothing young Montague," she said. "I'd Montague him if he was mine. I dessay you've heard something about him." She bit off a piece of thread, and added with a sharp glance through her spectacles, "Eh?"

"Well, I won't keep you in suspense any longer," said Richard, settling himself down again in his chair. "I know you'd be hanging over me all night to see if I let something drop in my sleep, if I didn't tell you. He's come back."

"Well there!" exclaimed Sarah. "And how do you know? Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"And is he high up in the world, as the poor boasting creature gives tongue to?"

Richard told her where and how he had met the deserter, and something of his hopes and ambitions, which had interested him to admiration, but did not

interest old Sarah in the least. "To think of that!" she cried in high glee. "A boy in a shop! Well, I'd give a hundred pound, if I'd got it, to ha' seen her face when he come in at the door an' told her."

"He hasn't come in at the door yet," said Richard. "He's coming over to-morrow afternoon. Mrs. Meaking doesn't know he's at Storbridge yet, or anything about him."

"What time is he coming over?" asked Sarah, sharply.

"What do you want to know for?" asked Richard, in return.

"I don't want to know, if you put it that way. I only asked the question."

"Oh, you wicked old thing! You do want to know. You want to catch a sight of him before his mother does. I know you and your deceitful ways."

"Don't you talk to me like that, Master Richard. A deceitful heart, as the Good Book says, is far from them as is in my comfortable state, and not to be brought up against such by them as stands without. And if I would like to see the prodigal returning, like husks before swine, what harm in that?"

"None that I know of, you old busybody. Well now, look here. I know what time he'll be coming in to Beechurst to-morrow, and if you go and make me a large piece of hot dripping toast in the kitchen, and bring it to me in bed, I'll tell you."

"I couldn't so demean myself. Dripping toast in bed, indeed! And at this time of night too! You ought to be ashamed of yourself asking for such a thing."

"Well, if you won't, you won't. Good-night, Sarah dear."

"Go along with you," said Sarah; and Richard retired.

Twenty minutes later, just as he had blown out his candle and settled himself to sleep, the door of his bedroom was opened and Sarah appeared, with a light, and a plate upon which was the desired delicacy. "It so happened," she explained, "that Lizzie was making some for our supper, and a piece being left over here it is. You wouldn't ha' got it otherwise."

"That's what I call the working of Providence," said Richard, sitting up in bed, "if it's true, which I doubt, for you're *not* a truthful woman, Sarah. Now don't be silly. You know you're not strong enough to take it away from me, now I've got it. Well, I'll tell you. He gets off from the shop at one o'clock. Then I suppose he'll have his dinner, and start off at about half-past. It will take him two hours to walk here, and he ought to be getting into Beechurst at about half-past three. So if you get behind the hedge in Ratley's Copse you can have a good look at him, and you'll always be able to say you were first."

"I don't want to see the young good-for-nothing," said Sarah. "You're making a mistake, Master Richard. I'd forgot all about him till you brought him to my mind. Now you just lay down and go to sleep, if you've finished repleting yourself like a boa-constrictor."

"Quite finished, thank you," replied Richard, settling himself down again in his pillows. "Good-night, Sarah dear; and do learn to tell the truth. You know where you'll go to if you don't."

Richard was up early the next morning, preparing to ride to the other side of the forest on some business

of his own in connection with the buying or selling of a pony, and told Job of Meaking's return, as a piece of interesting news that might congeal the frost of that retainer's early morning frame of mind.

"Drat young Meaking!" growled Job. "What do I care for he? He never done nobody no good 's fur 's I know, and ain't likely to it. Don't let him poke his nose in here, that's all I say, or he'll have a piece of my mind."

"You can't spare much, Job," said Richard. "I shouldn't make rash prophecies if I were you."

"I don't want none o' your lip, Master Richard," returned Job. "If you can't speak civil you just be off out o' this."

"I'm going as soon as I'm ready. You're not nearly so much interested in the news as Sarah was. She bribed me to tell her what time Meaking would be coming into Beechurst this afternoon, so as she could get a sight of him before his mother."

Job looked up at him. "Is that what she told you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And you believed her, eh?"

"Of course I did. What else should she want to know for?"

Job turned away, and began to pump water into a stable bucket. "Wonderful these here autumn tints are!" he said in a tone of detachment, between the strokes. Richard waited. "There's not nearly so much green about as there was." More strokes of the pump handle. "Leastways, not on the trees." Pump, pump, pump. "I s'pose it's in the autumn that green gets into people's eyes." Pump. "Some people can't see very far." Pump, pump. "Any old woman's

tale's good enough for them to swallow." Pump.
"Same as if it was an oyster."

"Well, come on then," said Richard, encouragingly.
"Get it out."

Job ceased his pumping. "Ain't you scholard enough to see," he said, "you with all your book-larnin', that what that spiteful old bag o' bones wants is to go and crow over Mother Meaking, and be a settin' there when the boy comes in to see his mother?"

"Oh, no, Job. You haven't got much opinion of Sarah, I know; but she wouldn't do a thing like that."

"Wouldn't she? She'd go and crow over her if he was being brought home in his coffin. She's the spitefullest old interferin' varmint ever I seed. If she's got one foot in the grave she'd pull it out to spite the sexton. Now you see if that ain't what she's up to. I knows 'er."

Richard, who had saddled and bridled his pony, and was ready to mount, began to tie his reins to a ring on the wall. "I'll just go in and see about it," he said. "I wouldn't have that happen. Meaking ought to see his mother with no-one else about."

"Look here," said Job, "you leave it alone. I'll see to it."

"How?"

"Never you mind how. I'll stop 'er little game. You can leave it to me quite safe."

Richard hesitated. "You'll promise?" he said. "I don't want her to go making mischief."

"Yes, I'll promise."

Richard rode off, and Job went about his business chuckling.

In the afternoon Sarah dressed herself in the self-same bonnet and jacket that she had worn when she

had bearded Mrs. Meaking ten years before on the subject of Richard's injury, and set out about three o'clock for that lady's cottage. Mrs. Meaking was engaged as on a former occasion, and showed some surprise, as she opened the door to her visitor.

"Good-afternoon, ma'am," said old Sarah, pleasantly. "It being a fine afternoon for the time of year, and me taking a short walk, and seeing your house so inviting, I made bold to come in and inquire."

Mrs. Meaking invited her politely to step inside. "What mischief is the old cat up to now?" was her inward comment as she handed her a chair, but all she said was: "I'm sure I take your notice very kindly, Mrs. Wellbeloved. And how is your saintly master, and the young gentleman?"

"I thank you, ma'am," replied Sarah. "Their health is good, neither shall any plague come nigh their dwelling. And I hope the same may be said of you and yours."

Her sweetness and temper were quite out of the common. Usually she would have bridled up at the implied superiority in Mrs. Meaking's inquiry. That lady was more than ever convinced that there was some hidden intention in her visit, and set her wits to work to bring it to light, carefully watching the channels into which the ensuing conversation was directed, and making her own contributions to it as non-committal as possible.

After circling about for a time among local happenings and personalities, Sarah said affably: "And what news is there of Mr. Montague lately? For I suppose with him so high in the world now, and up among the gentlefolks, honour must be given where honour is due."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Mrs. Meaking to herself. "Well, I don't give way an inch there."

"Thank you, Mrs. Wellbeloved," she replied. "Your sentiments are very proper, but I don't deny that others do not see the matter in that light, and much impertinence I have had to put up with on the subject. When my son does come back to visit me, which I have asked him not to do just yet, things here being not quite such as he in his position is accustomed to and has a right to expect, a very different tune, I assure you, will be sung."

This was just what old Sarah wanted, and her amiability became almost cloying as she proceeded: "Respect to true gentlefolk is what I never have and never will be wanting in. And if so be that the young gentleman has risen to a lofty station in the world, far be it from me to forget it."

"Stations in life, Mrs. Wellbeloved, are not always marked by the wealth belonging to such. You have seen me living quiet and contented in Beechurst, working for my living as if I was the same as them around me. But belong to a higher station I do, and brought up genteelly I have been, and the position in life now taken by my son is the rightful position I should occupy myself if all had their due."

"And it's the position you will occupy, ma'am, I make no doubt, when Mr. Montague does what a dutiful son ought to do for his mother. I take it that when he does come to visit you it will be in great state and gentility."

Mrs. Meaking gave a short laugh. "You must know, Mrs. Wellbeloved," she said, "that the class of gentlefolk to which I belong—or I might say *any* class of gentlefolk—does not use state in such matters, pre-

ferring to act simply, but as you say with gentility. You need not expect gold coaches and footmen with powdered wigs and silk calves, and if that's what you are driving at disappointed I'm afraid you will be."

"I'm not wholly ignorant of the ways of gentlefolk, ma'am," said Sarah, "and such state as you refer to I'm well aware is only practised by the titled nobility. But rumours I have heard that it is to sech that Mr. Montague has now risen. If so be as I am wrong, I s'pose I can be set right."

Mrs. Meaking set her lips tightly together. "I was never one to boast," she said. "Whether what you refer to is the case or not, is not for me to say at present. Time will show. But this I do say, that my own connexions are high in the world, and if it wasn't my own proper pride, not wishing to be beholden to nobody, rich or poor, high or low, I might be sitting in silks or satins with my hands in my lap, instead of working as now I do, and treated with impudence by them as should be touching their hats and dropping curtsies to me."

"Well, it must be a comfortable thought to you, ma'am, that when your son does come to visit you he will come as a gentleman equal to any, if not in a chariot and four, as is the way of the nobility. But that, I take it, need not be believed for gospel, well known as it is that your tongue is apt to run faster than the truth can overtake it."

Mrs. Meaking bridled. "I should scorn," she said, "to contradict you. As a lady born, brought down by misfortune and kept there by lawful pride, I must put up with the envious and backbiting cries of the lowly. It is not for me to boast before my inferiors of the position from which I have fallen, and to which

my son has risen again. It is not for me to make claims of any sort, nor do I. And if my son were here he would protect me against such insinuations as you are pleased to make, Mrs. Wellbeloved."

"Indeed, ma'am," said Sarah, "insinuations is far from me. But it's a hint here and a hint there, and never a straight word that can be taken up plain. Is your son high up in the world or is he not? Answer me that and I'll have no more to say."

"Yes, he is," replied Mrs. Meaking, goaded towards her destruction. "And as you take such a kind interest in me and mine, I'll tell you what I've told no-one else, and wish to go no further. Montague is an officer in the Army, with a scarlet uniform and gold lace in plenty, riding on a prancing horse, the same as the Honourable Captain Murthley, Lord Dibdin's son, only higher. And his clothes, whether by day or night, are a sight to see, dressing for his dinner every evening, as is the custom with the high-born gentry, and nobody looking more noble and gallant. And whether he'll be a lord himself some day or whether he won't, and—and nothing will induce me to let that out, being under an oath of secrecy—there's titled ladies in love with him in plenty, and hanging on his word."

"What, him and his red hair!" chuckled old Sarah.

"His hair, Mrs. Wellbeloved, is no concern of yours; and let me tell you that what is called red hair by the vulgar is much thought of and named auburn by those that know about such things. And now I've told you, but I don't wish it to be named elsewhere."

"Far be it from me, ma'am, to abuse confidence so kindly placed," said Sarah, now in a state of placid enjoyment that could hardly have been increased. "Now you've chosen to speak straight out your words

will be respected. I'm willing to own I'm surprised. It was my belief that Mr. Montague was likely, after all, to be nothing better than a shop-boy; but as you declare——"

"Shop-boy, indeed!" interrupted Mrs. Meaking, now warming to her work. "As I've told you so much, Mrs. Wellbeloved, and it won't go any further, for fear of me being accused of boasting, which I'd scorn to do, I'll tell you more. My son is waited on hand and foot by two valleys, and wouldn't be allowed to do so much for himself as button his own waistcoat, if he wished in his position to demean himself by so doing. Walk he never does, but rides in carriages and on horses, if it's only so little as to cross the street from one lord's house to another. And I can tell you that it's many the lord he'd scorn to associate himself with now."

"To think of that!" ejaculated Sarah. "And you settin' here quite humble, sewing a gusset and talking familiar to a servant!"

"Oh, it won't be for long, Mrs. Wellbeloved. There are family circumstances I needn't go into which prevent me taking my place at present, but when my Montague comes home to take me to where servants'll tremble at my slightest word, and lords and ladies will be my daily companions—Lor! what's that?"

A loud knock on the cottage door had startled both ladies. Mrs. Meaking sat in an attitude of expectation and old Sarah seemed to be taken with a fit of subdued but uncontrollable mirth.

The knock was repeated, and Mrs. Meaking rose to attend to it. She walked past her visitor to the door, opened it, and fell back with a startled cry. Then she rushed to the embrace of her son, who stood in the door-

way, with his flaming red hair, unsubdued by time and anointment, surmounting a florid face, the colour of which was heightened by his fast walk of seven miles.

"My boy! my boy! Come back to me at last!" sobbed Mrs. Meaking on his shoulder. "I've stood up against them all; but many's the time my heart has ached for you."

"There, Mother, that's all right," said John, patting her on the shoulder. "Let's come in and sit down for a bit, and I'll tell you all about it. I'm glad enough to see you again in the old place, and—Why, who's this? Mrs. Wellbeloved! How do you do? Been having a gossip with Mother, eh? That's quite like old times. Well, it does me good to see one of the old faces."

Old Sarah's hour of triumph had come, but somehow she did not quite see her way to taking advantage of it. John Meaking in a blue serge suit considerably worn, and a pair of London button boots very dirty and rather down at heel, looked as little as possible like a cavalry officer with two valets in his employ, but he did look like a strong self-reliant young man who might be disposed to take amiss any slight to his mother; and she, for her part, seemed to have forgotten for the moment the flights of imagination which she had recently soared, and was sitting on a chair beaming at her offspring, and intermittently dabbing at her eyes with a pocket handkerchief.

"Well, I'm pleased enough to see you, Mrs. Wellbeloved," proceeded John, as Sarah showed no signs of taking her departure, "but you'll understand that Mother and me has a good deal to talk over. So we'll say good-bye now, and we shall be very pleased to see you again later on."

Old Sarah found her feet and her tongue at the same time. "Far be it from me," she said, "to stay where I'm not wanted. I s'pose you left your prancing horse outside, Mr. Montague,—or p'raps I should say *Captain* Montague. And your two valleys is looking after your other suit, which if it's anything like the one you're wearing'll give 'em plenty o' work to do. An' the ladies of title that fall down and worships your graven image—they'll likely be on view in a day or two when the house is cleaned up a bit."

John, after a side glance at his mother, looked her straight in the face till she had finished. Then he said, "Oh, you're here to make mischief, are you? I might ha' known it if I'd remembered what you were like before,—a spiteful old busybody, always poking your nose into other people's affairs. You can be off out of this house, and you needn't put yourself out of the way to come back again."

"Hee, hee!" giggled old Sarah. "Shown the door by a shop-boy, when I was told to expect a lord in scarlet and gold! That's as good a joke as ever I heard, and it won't lose in the telling neither. Good-afternoon, my lord! *Good*-afternoon, my lady! Don't trouble to ring for the footman to show me out. I'll——"

But here she was interrupted by a loud and somewhat hysterical outburst of laughter from Mrs. Meaking, and paused in astonishment as that lady rocked to and fro in her chair, apparently convulsed with merriment.

"Yes, it is a good joke," she crowed. "One of the best jokes I've ever heard, and it's a joke against you, old Sarah Wellbeloved, and not against me. She came in here, Montague, prying and peering and trying to

lead me on. So I *let* her lead me on, and filled her up with nonsense which she sucked in like mother's milk. Ho, ho, ho! 'Twas a complete take in. Ho! Ho!" Her laughter suddenly ceased. "Spiteful old cat!" she said with a glare of fury. "Get out of my house, and don't you ever put your face inside my door again."

She advanced upon the old woman with a threatening mien, but Sarah stood her ground. "You may tell that story to them as'll believe it," she said. "Oh, I'm going. You needn't fly out like a fury. I came in here for a quiet little talk, not knowing anything more about where the lad was than the babe unborn. Not a word did I believe of what I was told, but I was *meant* to believe it, and may you be forgiven for the sin of lying that set on your conscience."

She turned to go, and came face to face with Job Wilding, who stood just inside the door. "So the boy's come home, has he?" said Job. "Time enough too, young varmint! I s'pose Mrs. Wellbeloved come to warn you about it, eh? Master Richard, 'e told 'er all about 'im yesterday, an' what 'e was doing."

John Meaking suddenly flamed into fury. "Get out of the house, both of you," he shouted. "Sarah Wellbeloved, you're a wicked, lying old woman, as full of malice as the devil; and you, Job Wilding, I've felt your hand many a time when I was a boy, but I'm a man now, and if I catch you worrying my mother with your evil tongue you'll feel the weight of mine."

"'Ere, don't you come the master over me, young Meaking," returned Job, "'cos I won't put up with it. I come here to stop this old clap-jacket making mischief, being asked for to do it by Master Richard."

"You came here to enjoy the mischief she'd tried to make," said John. "Outside the door, or I'll kick you out."

Job cast an indecisive glance around, and departed without another word, having the door slammed to upon his heels. Old Sarah had already scuttled down the garden path and was on her way back to the vicarage, pushing along the wet road like a rusty black beetle. John Meaking and his mother were left alone to balance accounts of relationship and to start afresh.

When Richard heard what had happened he first sought an interview with Job, and upbraided him in no measured terms for his duplicity. Job was taciturn and impenitent. "Don't you come a-worritin' o' me," was the burden of his defence, but his last words showed that his late experience had not left him unaffected. "If that red-headed young badger lays a finger on me," he growled, "I'll have the law on 'im."

Then Richard went up to the nursery, and stood in front of old Sarah like an accusing spirit.

"I've heard about the mean trick you've played," he said. "You did your best to deceive me, and you lied to Mrs. Meaking. I'll just tell you this: I don't want to hear anything more from you about religion as long as I live. I'm sick of it. It's all cant and hypocrisy with you. You haven't got an ounce of true religion in your body. You're full of malice and uncharitableness. What you've done I call real wickedness, and I'm glad I've found you out at last."

Sarah glared at him like a baffled old witch. She had plenty to say, but he was out of the room before she could begin to say it. "The idea!" she burst out, when he had shut the door behind him. "And me a

converted soul, and free from sin these fifty years! The impudence! I'll tell the master o' you, Master Richard, and a fine to-do you'll find you've made of it."

But, on consideration, she did not tell the master.

CHAPTER XV

RICHARD READS AND RIDES

MR. GANNETT, the bibliophile, had not enjoyed the services of his new assistant many days before it began to pierce even his vellum-and-parchment-protected brain that he had cause to congratulate himself. When John Meaking had been in his employment for a week the following changes in his surroundings had taken place. The dirty and indolent old harridan who had neglected him and his house for close upon thirty years had disappeared, and only the faint echoes of the cataclysm that accompanied her enforced departure had reached his ears. In fact, he had only been asked for authority to get rid of her and for money to pay her dues, and had been protected against all subsequent unpleasantness or attack. In her place reigned a clean, tidy body, who cooked decent food, brushed and mended Mr. Gannett's scanty wardrobe, cleaned out the house from top to bottom, and never got in the way. Mr. Gannett had hitherto connected any slight cleaning operations that might be considered obligatory with a period of the utmost discomfort and inconvenience to his habits and his business, and had come to look upon cleanliness as a terrible, if necessary, trial, to be avoided if possible, and always to be greatly dreaded. He now got the benefits of the operation without its drawbacks and found the change not unpleasant.

Again, with very little assistance from himself his whole stock had been reduced to some sort of order;

and though it was not altogether the order that he himself would have chosen if he could have brought himself to create it, it was found to be very convenient to know what books he possessed, and where they were to be found. Furthermore, all trouble over serving customers who came to buy cheap or modern books, such as he despised but seemed to be always acquiring, was taken off his hands, and he himself was left free to talk to his more intelligent clients and to devote his whole time to preparing the best catalogue he had yet sent out. His assistant even spent his evenings in copying out the entries Mr. Gannett had made during the day, relieving him of the nightmare of prospective proof-correcting, which by reason of his crabbed handwriting had been the one thing that had spoilt his enjoyment in those masterpieces in the past. "I won't deceive you, Mr. Gannett," Meaking had said in a loud, clear voice, when he had offered to do this work of supererogation. "I don't take the interest in the books that you do, and I don't do it for pleasure. But I want to help you all I can, and show that I'm worth my pay; and I want to learn all I can, so's I shall know all branches of the business." Mr. Gannett had accepted his assistance on this understanding, though not without a feeling of disappointment that his fellow labourer was unable to share his own zest in an occupation which he looked upon as the highest form of pleasure that life could afford.

Then Mr. Gannett, whom age and long years of sedentary employment, with only such sustenance as could keep the life in him, had robbed of the capacity or desire for many hours of sleep, had formerly found it a terrible trial to wait until his attendant allowed him to get up in the morning and begin his day. Now

he could rise at whatever time he liked, and find John up before him with a fire and a cup of tea ready to warm his old bones, and his desk cleared for him to work at. Mr. Gannett was accustomed to retire to rest at any time from one to three in the morning, while John was generally snoring in bed by ten o'clock and got even with him in that way.

In fact, no bookseller in the United Kingdom was served by so diligent, thoughtful, capable, and altogether exemplary an assistant as Mr. Gannett, and the old man, while taking most of the improvement in his condition with unconscious equanimity, was occasionally moved to congratulate himself upon it. This sense of welfare would come to him sometimes suddenly, and whenever it did so he would leave whatever occupation he was engaged in, trot over to where John was working, pat him on the shoulder, and say, "You're a good boy. I'll raise you," which was as near as he ever got to a spontaneous reference to money affairs.

The fact that the takings of the business showed marked advance even during the week that Meaking had employed himself chiefly in putting things straight could hardly be expected to afford Mr. Gannett great satisfaction, as he had always showed himself quite indifferent to this aspect of it. But it may be supposed that it was the all-important one to Meaking, and that he would not be content without further changes which his employer might not receive with such complacency as those which had already taken place.

Meaking confided some of his intentions and ambitions to Richard, who, intensely interested in what was going on in the shop in Abbey Street, seldom let a day pass without paying him a visit.

"I've got him comfortable now and pleased with me,"

said Meaking, on the morning after he had finally reduced the stock to order and faced the world of book buyers from a shop which offered them half as much attraction again as it had ever done before. "Now we've got to begin to go ahead, and we're going ahead in ways he won't be quite so pleased with. I don't mind telling you, Dick, 'cos I like to talk about these things to somebody, and you won't let what I say go any further, that if I hadn't come here about when I did the old man would have been in queer street in a very short time. He's a miser, that's what he is."

Richard opened his eyes. "That's news," he said. "I didn't know he cared a bit about money."

"And he doesn't. Money isn't the only thing you can hoard. He's a miser in books. He's got so as he can't bear to sell the best of them. I couldn't quite make out what was going on at first. I knew he'd got the reputation of knowing more about a certain line of books than anybody in the country, and I knew he must have made money over that, even if he drops some in unsaleable stuff. But when I came to look into things—mind this don't go any further—I found there was hardly anything in the bank, and very little coming in. Of course he doesn't spend anything on himself—hardly as much as a labourer, and the premises belongs to him, so where had the money gone? I needn't say that he don't keep accounts, but there's drawers full of letters and so on, and I worried it out one night, when he was asleep for a wonder. What do you think I found? He's pricing his books higher than their market value, so's nobody'll want to buy them from him. Did you ever hear of such an old image? I found it out for certain, because there was a correspondence from a gentleman who had bought a book at the catalogue price, high as it

was, and I saw that the old man must have written that the price in the catalogue was a mistake, and he couldn't let it go. He had to, though, and there was the cheque in the customer's last letter stowed away in a drawer and never paid in."

"By Jove!" said Richard. "You will have to stop that."

"No, I shan't stop it," replied John. "The old man's right, only he don't know it. That class of book's going up in value every day, and if they ain't worth what he prices 'em at now they will be by and by. I shall let him stick to that side of the business and work up the others so as he'll have money to buy. It's actually got so that in a week or two, if he'd gone on as he was doing, he wouldn't have been able to buy any more. I shall frighten him with that. There's a good deal to be got in. He has never worried over accounts, and if you don't worry people they won't pay. That's by experience. He has had the sense just to enter sales and purchases. That's all the books he's kept, and he's never cast even them up. Oh, things are going to be very different now. And I'll tell you one thing I'm going to do, Dick, and I want you to help me. I'll make it worth your while. I'm going to start a lending library. I think there's scope for it—a small one. The old man won't like it, but it'll make a bit, and I'll get a hold over him with that."

"How can I help?" asked Richard.

"Well, you can choose the books. You've gobbled up about a dozen I've let you read here in your dinner-time in less than a week, and I can see you'll read anything you can get hold of so long as it's amusing. You don't seem to trouble the calf-bounds much."

Richard laughed a little shamefacedly. "I get plenty

of that at school," he said. "But, I say, do you really mean it?"

"Yes, I do. I don't read myself. I haven't time. And, of course, it's the amusing books that people want in a library. Them and the 'standards.' You shall choose a couple of hundred volumes—novels and poetry and such-like to begin with—and I'll choose the editions and get 'em down hot and new from the publishers. I can't afford to pay you in cash, but I know you'll like doing it, and I'll put you on the free list, and you can have first go of any book in the library, and take 'em away two at a time as often as you like. Now, how will that suit you?"

Richard made haste to reply with delight that it would suit him admirably, and the bargain was struck. It was in some ways rather a curious collection of books with which Mr. Gannett's circulating library was eventually started, for Richard's knowledge of authors was not on a par with his voracious appetite for reading. All his own favourite books were, of course, included, and a respectable percentage of them proved to be acceptable reading to the subscribers to the library, so that his selection was on the whole justified. When it became necessary to enlarge the library and to infuse new blood into it by buying from time to time popular books of the moment, John made him read reviews and publisher's advertisements, and, in fact, made use of him generally, knowing well it was the greatest pleasure to him to be made use of in that way.

Richard revelled in it. There comes a time to every boy who has the love of books in him when he begins to make discoveries and to plunge with the keenest joy into much-trodden, but to him new and delightful, paths. The time may come soon or late, and the zest may

spread itself over years, ever widening, or it may concentrate itself early into a lifelong pursuit of one narrow track; but the books read during those fresh golden days will always carry something of a glamour, even if riper taste has learnt to reject them.

Here was a boy with a genuine though quite unencouraged taste for literature, and an insatiable curiosity about life. He had had hardly any experiences outside the little circle that immediately surrounded his village home, and had had so few books to read, that, until he was given the run of the fairly well-stocked library of his school, he was ignorant of even the names of the great masters of romance. John Baldock, in spite of the fact that he was a good classical scholar and plied a busy pen in evangelical reviews and journals, was illiterate. The masterpieces of Greek and Latin literature, whose language he was so skilful in dissecting, were meaningless to him, except as exercises in syntax or prosody; of poetry he knew little and cared less, and on novels, even the greatest, he looked askance. His library, consisting mainly of old sermons and the work of out-of-date divines, if it had been sold in the open market, would have gone to swell the pile of books such as Mr. Gannett exhibited in his two-penny and three-penny trough, and of books that might interest a boy who was developing a thirst for reading there were scarcely any.

But in the disused drawing-room was a shelf of books that had belonged to Richard's mother, and almost all of these he had devoured. He had read "David Copperfield" by the time he was twelve, and had re-read it many times since. Of all the little collection this was his favourite. Charles and Mary Lamb's "Tales from Shakespeare" came next, but until he went to

school he had never read a line of Shakespeare himself. "Paradise Lost" he waded through twice, finding patches of very attractive descriptive writing amongst a mass of what he regarded as dry stuff. He knew something of Cowper's poems and Longfellow's, and those of the now almost forgotten Kirke White, but they hardly stirred the passion with which he afterwards devoured every modern book of poetry on which he could lay his hands. The rest of the collection was made up of evangelical tales and one or two picturesque annuals and gift books, so that the mental sustenance he drew from it was somewhat meagre; but "David Copperfield" was a constant delight, and the village library contained one or two of the "Waverley Novels," as well as "Oliver Twist" and "The Old Curiosity Shop." This was almost the extent of his reading up to the age of fifteen, except that during his short visit to his aunt he had got hold of Tennyson's poems, and had been wild to obtain a copy for himself ever since.

The first book he took out of the school library when he went to Storbridge was "The Pickwick Papers," and the second was "Martin Chuzzlewit," and so on right through Dickens until he was brought up by "Little Dorrit," which he found dull and depressing reading, so he cast about for another novelist, and lit upon "Pendennis." When he had finished this and devoured "Vanity Fair," he was as keen an enthusiast on Thackeray as he had been on Dickens. Then followed a course of Anthony Trollope, with a check at the political novels; a week of absorbed delight over "Lorna Doone"; candles burnt at night for "The Moonstone" and "The Woman in White," and yawns over two subsequent attempted works of Wilkie Collins. A puzzled

plunge into Meredith—he was only fifteen—Miss Bradon, Charles Reade, both the Kingsleys, James Payn, and very many more, the great Victorians as well as the small. He soaked himself in a sea of novels, and interspersed his reading with poetry good and bad, and there it ended. He read for his pleasure alone, and showed no signs of becoming a bookworm, though, with Meaking always at his elbow and Mr. Gannett, who had taken a fancy to him, occasionally conversing with him upon the subject of which his thoughts were full, he began to know a good deal in a superficial way about books and authors.

Probably there is no form of pleasure, however innocent in itself, in which complete absorption does not bring satiety. Richard's orgy of novel-reading lasted through the autumn and winter, and by the time spring came round the brightness of his character had become a little tarnished. It was not possible for him actually to shirk his lessons, because the preparation for them was invariably done under his father's eye, and in school-time he worked fairly well. But zest for his work had departed, and at the end of the Michaelmas term the rival who was running with him for the school exhibition, but whom he had always hitherto beaten, went above him. His father was very angry. He had marked the slacking effort, but had not been able to put his finger on the cause of it. Richard confided in him very little. By his harshness and obstinate self-absorption he had put it out of his own power to gain the boy's complete confidence. At the same time Richard had never designedly hidden anything from his father, and his conscience told him now that he was deceiving him. For he knew well enough that if it were known that he often read in bed until the early hours of the morning,

that he hid himself away somewhere to read when he knew that his reading openly would be remarked upon, and that he read novels on Sundays, he would be very severely reprimanded and his novel-reading stopped altogether. A naturally frank and open nature like Richard's could not but be damaged by the knowledge that he was acting secretly.

Then, again, the balance of his life was destroyed. He had hitherto been out of doors every moment in the day that could be spared from his lessons. Now he was always poring over a book, and shutting his ear to the call of the forest. His long ride to and from school—fourteen miles five days a week in rain or shine—kept him physically fit, but he grew unhappy, for the reading became after a time an obsession, and he read when he would much rather have been out of doors. At the end of the winter he felt somehow that a season had gone by of which he had missed the pleasure. He had put himself out of tune with nature. The forest had called him again and again, and he had refused to listen to the summons.

Meaking gave him a warning word. Meaking had plans in his head, plans which concerned Richard himself, but he had not yet disclosed them. But he kept a watchful eye on his now constant companion.

"I've got a day off to-morrow," he said one Friday afternoon in the middle of a glorious February. "It's the first I've had, 'cept Christmas, since I've been here. I didn't mean to ask for one for six months, but this weather! I can't put it off any longer. Lend me a pony, Dick, and we'll have a long ride through the forest. I'll get over by nine o'clock, after I've seen to the old man."

Richard looked up to a sky of soft cloudless blue.

"I don't know that the weather's going to last," he said.

"Oh, rot. You know better than that."

"I don't think I want to ride the whole day long. I get about enough riding on the rest of the week."

"You never could get enough before. And think of the forest on a day like this! The fact is you want to mug indoors with a book. You're overdoing it, and that's the truth. It isn't as if it was leading to anything like it might be with me, if I spent my spare time in reading books—good books. You're filling yourself up with trashy novels, just to amuse yourself."

"I don't read trashy novels. I'm reading the best novels that were ever written."

"Trash as well. And I don't care if they were all good ones. You're overdoing it. Eat as much as you want, but don't give yourself a stomach-ache. That's one of my mottoes."

"It's a precious poor one."

"Well, perhaps it isn't one of my best. Anyway, it applies to you. Look at the old man. It's books with him, and nothing but books. I don't suppose he knows the difference between an oak and a beech. He don't want to. You wouldn't want to grow like him."

"Of course not. You're talking nonsense."

"I'm not. Look at me. Grow all round, that's one of my mottoes. That's why I've come away from London, where everybody wants to get to, and settled down here in the country. I tell you it's something worth having—a love for the country—and knowing it. I'm not going to chuck away a thing like that. It's a possession, and one you can't buy. You've got it, perhaps more than me. And you're chucking it away. At least, you're wasting it."

"Well, I'll come with you to-morrow, and I'll lend you a pony, but we shall have to take it easy. Tommy's a trifle stale."

"I don't mind that. We'll walk 'em as much as you like. I only want to get into the forest. We'll ride through Wood Hinton and past Denham enclosure and Brackley Bog to Exton, and I'll stand a lunch at the hotel. We'll make a day of it. I'll turn up at nine."

Although he would have been ashamed to acknowledge it, this was the first whole day Richard had spent afield since early the previous autumn, and he enjoyed it exceedingly. They struck right into the heart of the forest directly they got out of the village, and rode by little-frequented tracks for mile after mile without touching a metalled road. The wet rides were bright green under the heavenly blue, the hollies glistened between the tree-trunks standing on their red carpet underneath the purpling branches of oak and beech. Primrose leaves, with here and there a pale early flower, tufted the borders of the paths. The sweetness of spring was abroad. The wet, odorous soil, the swelling buds, the birds in brake and thicket, the warm sun, the fresh, soft air, were all eloquent of it. Meaking, with town and shop and strenuous ambition pushed clean away from him, became bucolic, the born woodlander, contented with the day, careless of the future, part of the world of nature around him, breathing and growing with it, rejoicing under the same influences of warmth and freshness and bursting life. He shouted for joy as he rode along. He had been faithful to the forest; there had been nothing in his life to resist its influences. He could come back to it and be received as an integral part of its stirring life, feel the joy of it in his very bones,

with never a jarring thought of the outside world to disturb his emotions.

Richard had the freedom of the forest too, but he felt dimly that he had been misusing it. Even now as he rode he must be trying to fit in the sensations which had grown up with him to those he had lately experienced. He tried to find words, phrases, rhymes, to see at second hand what had always been familiar to his own eyes. "Hang your poetry!" said Meaking, when he had spouted a few lines from his then favourite. "We don't want to hear what people say about it; we've got it."

They came about mid-day to the village of Exton, stabled their ponies, wandered about the ruins of the noble abbey, and stood on the bridge underneath which the water flowed into the broad tidal river. The tide was high, and the great expanse of water, full up to the tree-lined shores, lay like a quiet lake in the February sunshine. Two swans flew over their heads on their way down the river, cleaving the air with slow beats of their wings, making a kind of hoarse music which could be heard as long as they were in sight. White pigeons sunned themselves on the roof of the mill-house or circled round the chimneys. The clock on the gate-house of the abbey chimed the hour.

"What a beautiful place this is," said Richard. "I should like to live here."

"Yes, it's a beautiful place," replied Meaking; "as beautiful a place as there is in England. But it's feudal. It isn't quite the forest."

"You're crazy on the forest."

"*You* used to be, and you will be again when you've come to your senses. Now we'll go and have some lunch and get back again."

They rode back along the road, through the woods and across the heaths, and reached Beechurst at twilight. They walked their ponies for the last few miles, and neither of them had spoken for some time, until just as they were nearing the village, Meaking said: "Well, this has been the happiest day I've had for a long time. I hope we shall have more like it together. But I'd like to say something to you, Dick. We're friends, and you won't take it amiss."

"You're going to say that I read too many novels and too much poetry," said Richard. "You've said it before, and I don't particularly want to hear it again."

"I wasn't going to say exactly that, though it's true. It's partly my fault. I was wrong to get you to help me with the library. It's my work, but you've got other things to do at present, and it isn't fair either to your father or yourself to take you from them. What I want to say is this: You're not working on a plan; I mean you're not working towards anything. Of course you're young, and perhaps you don't see the importance of it yet. I'm young, too, and because I do see the importance of it I'm on the way to success. Now I know what's in store for you. I don't believe you've ever thought about it at all. You've taken it for granted, and you've got a good many years before you at school and at college—pleasant years—before you've got to take up your work. I'm not saying anything against being a parson. It's a good enough life for anybody who's suited for it and goes into it with his eyes open. Some people say it's the best life. But I don't think it is, except, perhaps, for a very few. Anyhow, it's the worst life in the world for a man who takes it up only as an occupation and a means of getting a livelihood; I'm sure of that. He's cut off from

natural ambition, and he just becomes a vegetable—a canting vegetable. It must hurt his character in the long run. Now, it may be the right thing for you, but I do hope you'll make certain that it is before you take it on. Of course I know you're as good as gold, a jolly sight cleaner minded than most fellows who are being trained for the Church; and that's just why it will hurt you more than it would them if you went into it without seriously thinking what it meant, and feeling that you couldn't possibly do anything else. That's how it ought to strike a man going into the Church, I think. You won't misunderstand me and think I'm a meddler for saying this, will you?"

"No, old chap," replied Richard; "it's very good of you. It's quite true that I haven't thought much about it yet; there's plenty of time. Of course I want to go to Oxford. I don't know whether father would let me if he didn't mean me to take orders afterwards."

"Ah," said Meaking, significantly. "Well, I see it isn't time to say more about it at present; but you take my advice, Dick, and don't let yourself drift. When you're running a race keep your eyes on the winning-post; that's one of my mottoes."

Richard laughed suddenly. "Work with an object," he said.

"That's all right," said Meaking; "but what is there to laugh at?"

"Oh, nothing. It was the advice given me by another friend."

"Very good advice, too. You keep it in mind, and you won't go far wrong. And now I'll be getting on to mother's. Good-bye, old fellow. We've had a jolly day."

CHAPTER XVI

A FAIRY OF THE FOREST

A MILE from the village on the road which Richard traversed twice a day on his way to school lay Beechurst Hall, an Elizabethan house of great beauty, with high-pitched roof and great chimney-stacks, its windows looking across a formal garden divided from the road only by a small fence, to a park-like rise. The house had lain empty ever since Richard could remember, but it had been kept in good repair and would have been ready at any time for the occupancy of its owner. An old couple looked after it and jealously guarded its privacy. Richard had felt some curiosity from time to time as to its interior, but had never succeeded in getting inside its doors. There was no temptation to trespass in the gardens, which were mostly open to the roads, and were kept in rough order by the old caretaker and a boy from the village. Lacking its human soul the house had passed away from all connection with the village and was as little regarded by the inhabitants as if it had never been built, though in past years it had passed through troublous times and had left its mark upon history. The foresters and villagers of Beechurst passed it without so much as a turn of the head, and had nothing to say of it to inquiring visitors, except that it belonged to Squire Ventrey, who lived in foreign parts.

One day, about a month after his expedition with Meaking, Richard glanced at the Hall as he rode by and

saw signs of unusual activity about it. Doors and windows were open and chimneys smoking. A builder's cart stood on the gravel, and one or two workmen were busy about it. A little farther along the road he met the builder himself, a Storbridge man whom he knew, driving towards the house, and reined up his pony to receive information.

"Mornin', Master Baldock," said the builder. "Great doings at the Hall. Squire's coming back at Easter, and I've got to get the whole place in order in less than a month. Had to throw over another job for it. I must be getting on."

When Richard returned home that evening he found excitement reigning in Beechurst. Even the Vicar was not wholly free from it. Richard ventured to make inquiries of him as they sat together at their evening meal. But John Baldock objected to answering questions. The only way of getting information out of him was to feign indifference towards the subject on which he had it to impart, and Richard was too interested to take that course in this instance.

"You will know all in good time," was the Vicar's irritating answer to his inquiry. "Curiosity about other people's affairs is a temptation to be guarded against."

"I don't want to know anything about Mr. Ventrey's affairs, father," replied Richard. "I only asked you about him. If he is coming to live here it is interesting to us."

"You are far too interested in carnal matters, Richard," said his father. "I wish you would try to realize that we have not here an abiding city. We are like wayfarers passing through a street on our way home."

"But the wayfarer might be rather interested in the

people who lived in the street. Especially if it took him seventy or eighty years to pass through it."

"That is an impertinent speech, Richard, as well as an irreligious one. You may leave the table. I do not wish for your company if you cannot behave yourself."

Richard, who had nearly finished his tea, was not sorry to be dismissed. He thought he would be able to extract rather more information from Sarah.

Sarah proved to be quite willing to impart such as she possessed. "Squire Ventrey," she said, "has got tired of living in foreign parts, as well he may. It's a matter of over twenty years since the Hall was left him, and it's my belief he never so much as set foot in it, more's the shame for preferring the company of them godless Frenchmen to honest English folk. He's old in years and I make no doubt old in sin, for I'm told he's a Roman Catholic; and I s'pose now we shall have them there dirty priests skulking about the place seeking to devour, and the worst terrors of the Imposition. A sin and a shame it is, I say, that such things should be allowed in a Christian country, and if the people of this place ain't all in a state o' grace—which none knows better than me is the case, and sorry I am for it, and wrestling in prayer night and day that judgment mayn't fall on 'em, which I shouldn't be surprised if it did wi' fire and brimstone in a way they won't like—all the more reason why they shouldn't be led further astray, poor lost lambs, but some of 'em more like wolves to look at, it seems to me."

"Well, he's an old man and a Roman Catholic. What else? Is there a Mrs. Ventrey, or any sons and daughters?"

"Mrs. Ventrey's been dead and finding out her mistakes this many years. I've heard tell of no sons, but

there's a young lady. The orders is to paint all the woodwork in two rooms white for her, and furniture's to be sent down specially. A mincing baggage, I make no doubt, with airs and graces, poor benighted Papist, and her mind set on luxury and vanity."

"Sweet, charitable soul you are, Sarah dear! How old is she?"

"Not being told, I can't say for certain. But Squire Ventrey's seventy if he's a day, so she's no chicken. Paints her face most prob'ly, as is the custom in heathen countries, and tries to look like an innocent. She and her white painted rooms! Bah! Go along!"

"Well, there's an old gentleman and his daughter. It doesn't sound very lively. Have you ferreted out anything else?"

"I'll thank you not to use such words to me, Master Richard, which it's well known that Mrs. Biddle up at the Hall is friendly with me, where others she scorns, and I had occasion to pay her a visit this afternoon."

"Of course you had. What did she tell you?"

"There's servants coming down from London when the workmen is out of the house. A pack of them—trollopin' hussies! There's to be a great *man* to spoil their food for them, if you please. Mrs. Biddle, whose niece is cook to a titled family, isn't good enough for them. Of course not!—a respectable woman who's no patience with foreign ways and wouldn't drop a curtsy to a priest, not if he was to blight her with a stroke for it. She and Biddle's to live in the lodge, I'll trouble you; them as has had the Hall for over twenty years, same as if it was their own, you might say. Oh, I've no patience with such goings on."

"Are they going to have any horses?"

"Oh, horses! Yes. Camels too, I make no doubt,

and dromedaries, if their lustful pride requires such. The stables is to be done up same as the rest. But there! What's the good of talking? We shall see what we shall see, and I, for one, don't expect no good from it."

Job, with whom Richard had a short interview as he saddled his pony the following morning, seemed hardly less pessimistic concerning the coming changes than Sarah, but apparently found some consolation in the prospect of theological disturbances.

"I know them there Roman Catholics," he said. "I seed one at Gladehurst Fair when I was a boy. They bows down to idols, and beef and mutton's an abomination to them, same as pig-meat to a Jew. And they don't let you alone, neither. Why, you and me is heathen to their way of thinking, and the master too. Hee! Hee! Happen the Squire'll tell him so. Now that's what I'd like to hear. If you get a chanst, Master Richard, you persuade 'em to have it out in this here yard when I'm washing out. Don't say it right out, but inveigle 'em. Eh? Harses? No, not as I've heard tell on. Two stalls and a loose box, that's all. Happen a pair o' carriage harses and a riding mare for the young woman. There'll be no hunting. They're a poor lot. Hee! Hee! A Roman Catholic Squire and a holy man for a parson! Well, that do beat all." And Job retired, chuckling.

The preparations at the Hall went on apace. By favour of his friend, the builder, Richard went through the house one Saturday morning, wondering at the carved panelling, the stately furniture, the pictures and the china, penetrated to the two sunny upstairs rooms of which the drab-coloured walls were taking on a dress of virgin white, and thought what a pity it was that

such delightful surroundings should be wasted on an elderly spinster. He was routed out of the house by Sarah's friend, Mrs. Biddle, before he had completed his investigations, and from the stables by Mrs. Biddle's husband, both of whom seemed in a state of unaccountable fury. "Disagreeable?" said Job, when he told him of his experience. "'Course they're disagreeable. Who wouldn't be? Going into a comfortable little house wi' nothing to do for it, and money paid 'em. Reg'lar blood-sucker, this 'ere Squire Ventrey! I wouldn't stand it if I was the old Biddles. They've lived in the Hall for over twenty year, an' now he wants to live in it himself. Grinding the face of the poor, that's what I call it."

The Storbridge builder finished his job and drew off his men. Then came great vans of furniture to add to a house that already seemed full of it. Curious onlookers reported one of them at least full of packing cases of a uniform size and of great weight. "Corpses," suggested a village humourist. "Books," corrected Richard; "they weigh a lot." Servants had already made their appearance and were busy with unpacking. Information leaked through the barricade kept up by the still resentful Biddles. With the exception of the Squire's confidential man, who was superintending the operations, they were all newly engaged and knew nothing of their master or his belongings.

Richard's interest, revived by the cases of books, fell at the meagreness of the stable arrangements which were next revealed. There were two horses, whose claims to breeding were but modest, a station brougham and a luggage cart, the whole being under the charge of one groom who repelled advances.

On the Wednesday before Easter the Squire and his

belongings installed themselves. They came after dark, it was said straight from Paris, and those of the villagers who stood in the road to watch their entry saw nothing but the brougham with its windows blinded drive in at the gate, followed by the station fly containing additional attendants, and the luggage cart. Further curiosity had to sleep until the morrow.

Easter was late that year, well on into April, and the weather was a foretaste of summer. Richard was up very early on the morning after the arrival and prowling in the woods which abutted on to the gardens of the Hall. The house, which had hitherto hardly counted in the influences exercised by his surroundings, now appealed to his imagination. He wondered why he had thought so little of it. It was a sight to gladden the eyes on this sweet April morning as he looked at it from an opening in the trees, lying quiet and spacious and mellow, in its beautiful setting of garden and wood and park land, under the soft blue of the sky; a house of many memories now revived by human occupancy. The smoke beginning to rise from the chimneys seemed to bring it into relation with the life which he knew. The aspect of the village as it had always presented itself to his mind had changed. The old house so long of no account had quietly taken its place as paramount, and there was no question of disputing its claim.

It was not long past seven o'clock. The sun had been up for two hours, but the dew was heavy upon grass and bushes, and the freshness of dawn still lingered. Richard stood in a clearing of the wood and gazed at the house, thinking himself quite alone and unwatched. Suddenly he drew himself up with a startled exclamation as a clear voice close behind him said: "Boy, what are you doing here?"

He turned round and saw a child of about seven years old standing under a great oak, gravely regarding him—the most beautiful child he had ever seen. Great masses of yellow hair fell about her shoulders from under a wide, shady hat, and framed a little face of pure oval, out of which a pair of eyes of forget-me-not blue gazed inquiringly. She was dressed in white, with little bare legs over socks and shoes drenched in dew, and carried a bunch of primroses in her hand. Richard stared at her open-mouthed, having completely lost his self-possession at the unexpected sight of this dainty fairy of the forest.

“What are you doing here?” she said again, and there was ever so slight a foreign intonation in her words, a little roll of the “r” and a deliberation over the vowels. “It is very early in the morning, and most people are in bed.”

Suddenly she threw back her head and laughed deliciously, with a thrill in her voice like a little black-bird. Richard returned to himself.

“Listen,” she said. “I woke up very early, oh, but almost as soon as the sun. And I drew up the blind and looked out at this lovely place. And I said to myself that I must go out and listen to the birds. I have never heard birds like these. So I dressed very quietly, so as not to wake Artemise, and I ran out. And I came into this wood and found these beautiful *primevères*—I do not know their English name—and I have been picking them, oh, for so long. And there is Artemise thinking that I am asleep in my bed all the time.” Again she laughed in full enjoyment of the matchless joke, and again became serious.

“But you have not told me who you are and why you are up so early too,” she said.

"My name is Dick," said Richard. "I am the son of the vicar. I generally get up early and go out to hear the birds sing, like you."

"Then we will go out together, and you shall tell me the names of the birds and the flowers. I am glad you are the son of the *vicaire*, because I like you. You have a very nice face, and Artemise cannot say that it is not proper for me to talk to you. I like talking to people, but it is so often '*pas convenable*.' I am sick of that word. I will call you Dick, and you must call me Lettice, for that is my name, an English name which Artemise says is *farouche*; but I am proud of being English, though I have never been in England before. Do you think the name of Lettice is *farouche*?"

"I think it is a very pretty name," responded Richard, a little surprised at the extreme friendliness of the little lady, but none the less enchanted. "I can tell you a lot of things about the birds and the flowers and trees; secrets I can tell you, and show you things that other people don't know of."

The child laughed delightedly. Richard thought he had never seen anything quite so fascinating as the way she threw back her head, opened her little red mouth, and sent forth her thrilling bird-music. "That will be lovely," she said. "I am so glad you got up early and came here this morning. Tell me a secret now."

Richard looked around him. There was a big hawthorn bush near where they stood, and his practised eye had noted the coming and going of a pair of chaffinches while he and the child had been talking. He peered into the bush and parted the branches. "Come and look here," he said.

The child tiptoed towards him, her hands clasped in front of her. "Oh, a nest," she whispered, tense with

excitement. "I have never seen a nest so close. Are there some little birds in it?"

"There are five little eggs. I will lift you up, and you can see them."

She cried out with delight as she saw the spotted grey-green eggs in the soft cup of the nest. "Those are chaffinches' eggs," Richard explained. "See how carefully the nest is built, and the little soft feathers woven in to keep the tiny birds warm when they come out of the shells. Do you see the green moss on the outside; it is of the same colour as the leaves, and the clever little birds put it there so that the nest shall be difficult to see. Some day I will find you a chaffinch's nest on an old apple tree. Then you will see that they put lichen on the outside instead of the moss, so that their enemies shan't be able to see the nest against the trunk of the tree."

"Clever little birds," said the child. "But what enemies?"

"Cats and stoats and weasels. They climb up the trees and eat the poor little birds. And sometimes a great owl comes swooping down on them. They will have to be very careful when they are hatched out and are learning to fly."

The child listened eagerly to him, with earnest eyes fixed on his face. "The nest and the little eggs are a secret between you and me," she said. "And we will come and look at them every day, won't we? till the little birds come. Do you live quite near here?"

"About a mile away. I ride along the road every day when I go to school. But there are holidays now. I shall not be going to school again for another three weeks. I will take you into the forest and tell you

other secrets if—if——. Are you Mr. Ventrey's little girl?"

"He is my grandpapa," she said. "He and I live together and love each other very much. He reads to me out of books, but he cannot teach me out-of-door secrets because he cannot walk."

"Can't walk!"

"No. Poor grandpapa. He is *paralytique*. Filmer helps him to dress and wheels him out of doors, but in the house he wheels his chair himself. And I open the doors for him. He does not get up very early, or you could come in and see him now. But, ah, what is that?"

Again the burst of bird-like laughter, as a white-capped and aproned figure appeared on the terrace which ran along the back of the house, wringing distracted hands and calling, "M'selle Lettice! M'selle Lettice!"

"It is Artemise, who has at last missed me," said the child. "I must go to her now. Good-bye, dear Dick. I shall see you again very soon." She put up her little flower-like face, and Richard bent down and kissed her. Then she was flying across the grass, her long hair streaming behind her, leaving him to stand motionless with a wealth of new sensations rising in his heart until she and the *bonne* disappeared into the house.

Richard walked slowly home. He had a great deal to think of. So this was the reality which was to take the place of the unattractive dream conjured up out of old Sarah's imagination. In place of a middle-aged spinster, of no possible interest to anybody, a frank and most engaging little child, sweet-eyed and friendly, a sylph-like rarity but warmly human too, the very remembrance of whom caused his heart to thrill. He thought of his morning's adventure all through the day

with a kind of exaltation. It was too precious to bear discussion, and he told no one of it, receiving even without comment Sarah's announcement of the discovery that the Squire had no daughter, but a little grandchild, the only other member of his family left alive. "A spoilt brat, I warrant," said Sarah, "with a foreign trollop to wait on her hand and foot and fill her mind with idolatries. All we can do is to pray that a judgment won't fall on the place, but it ain't likely that our prayers'll be answered."

Richard left her to the satisfaction aroused by this consideration, and went downstairs. He did not know that his father had been to call on the Squire, for the Vicar had repulsed his attempts to lead the conversation on to the subject at their early dinner, being in that mood which is known in the nursery as "contrariness." He came into the hall as Richard reached the bottom of the stairs. "You are to go at once to the Hall," he said. "Mr. Ventrey wishes to see you. Please make yourself as tidy as possible. Why did you not tell me that you had already met Mr. Ventrey's granddaughter?"

Richard hung his head and flushed up. "I—I don't know," he said.

His father looked at him severely. "That is no answer," he said. "You must have had some reason for not telling me. You could talk of nothing but Mr. Ventrey and his belongings the other day."

Richard looked up. "And you told me not to, father," he said, not without a note of opposition in his voice.

The Vicar frowned. "You are getting impertinent in your speech towards me," he said, angrily, "and you are idle over your work. My patience is at an end."

I shall not permit you to go on in the way you are doing now. Go up to the Hall now and do not stay longer than an hour. And come to me directly you return." He retreated into his study and shut the door behind him with decision.

The better understanding that had arisen between John Baldock and his son had largely evaporated during the past months. Perhaps because he was not entirely contented with himself, Richard had felt more irritation against his father of late than ever before. But he was too used to blame and injustice to allow their exhibition to disturb him very much, and with the prospect of this wonderful visit filling his mind he put from him all thoughts of the ordeal that was to come after it. He ran upstairs and changed quickly into his best clothes, then hurried out of the house and along a forest track which led him out on to the road opposite to the Hall, his mind filled with pleasurable anticipations and a little alarm.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SQUIRE AND THE VICAR

RICHARD rang at the bell and was admitted first of all into a spacious hall, and, after a short wait, into a long, low room full of books from floor to ceiling. He had an impression of a white-haired man sitting with a rug across his knees by a table laden with silver near a bright fire, and then saw nothing but the figure of his little friend of the dewy morning and the forest glade coming to meet him down the long length of the room. She smiled at him, and, taking his hand, led him to her grandfather. "I am very glad you have come," she said, "Dick."

The Squire shook hands with him courteously, as if he were an equal. Richard saw before him a man with white hair and beard, but a fresh-coloured face and a pair of piercing grey eyes, observant but kind. The shyness with which he had entered the room vanished as he met the look of his host. "You have already made the acquaintance of my granddaughter," said the old man. "I am glad that she found someone to tell her something about the beauties and interests of her new home so soon after she came to it."

"I told grandpapa about the five little eggs," said the child. "When I said it was to be our secret I forgot to tell you that I tell all my secrets to grandpapa." She leant against him, and the old man drew her fondly towards him.

"Please sit down, Dick," he said. "We are all three

going to be friends, and I shall begin by calling you Dick, as a friend should. Yes, Lettice and I have many secrets between us. Lettice likes secrets, and I know you are going to tell her ever so many new ones. She has been a little town bird hitherto. Sometimes we have flown away together to the blue sea and the flowers, but we have never lived amongst the trees and the fields before. Most of our secrets have had to do with people, and some with books. Now we are going to learn some of the secrets of nature. And you are to be our teacher. Your father says that you know as much about this wonderful forest as any of our neighbours. I have asked him if you may go with my little bird when she is free to roam about the forest—but she is not going to give the good Artemise the slip again, and roam about by herself, eh, my treasure?" He pinched the child's cheek and she blushed and looked down.

"That was a little error of judgment," he continued, in his pleasant, well-modulated voice. "Freedom is a good thing, but little birds as young as ours want companionship in their freedom. Would you like to be the companion sometimes, when you, too, are free, Dick?"

Richard made haste to reply that he would like nothing better, rather awkwardly, but frankly too. The Squire's eyes looked searchingly at him, and evidently found nothing in his appearance and manner that did not please him.

"You must come here whenever you like," he said. "When it is fine you and Lettice shall go into the forest and the gardens, and sometimes, perhaps, you will push my chair for me, so that I may share your pleasures. When it is wet, we shall find something to do indoors. I have many books and other treasures. Do you like books?"

"Oh, yes," said Richard. "I read as much as ever I can."

"Then we will talk about books together. It is a great thing to be fond of books. One is never lonely or dull with them to bear one company, and one does not mind being kept indoors. But books are chiefly for the fire and lamp light, and for the bad days, unless one's life work is concerned with them. To live an outdoor life where one can, that is far better. I am sure you are an open-air boy, are you not? and do not brood over books when you can be out in your beautiful forest."

Richard looked a little shamefaced. "I have been reading a great deal this winter," he said. "More than I used to. Chiefly novels," he added, for he did not want to appear in false colours, surrounded by the rows and rows of grave-looking books on the walls.

The Squire looked kindly at him. "You have begun to see that life is a wonderful thing," he said. "And you can learn about life from novels. But it is better, you know, to observe for yourself, rather than to take for granted what others tell you. And you must not let go the things you have taught yourself in your out-of-door life. Your eyes are open to them now, and you take them in a way you will not be able to later on. You are laying up for yourself a great store of pleasure for future years. I learnt these things, too, when I was young. I know the forest and love it, though I have not visited it for fifty years. But I want my little Lettice to grow up to know it and love it too, so at last I have come back. And I want you to show her everything you can, and to teach her the secrets of nature. I want you first of all to buy her a pony and

teach her to ride it, a good little forest pony. I dare say you know of one that would do."

Richard knew of several, and undertook the commission with eagerness. He was immensely impressed by the kindness of the Squire and the interest he showed in him, not a little grateful, too, enchanted at the idea of so sweet a little companion for his forest rambles, and proud of the trust imposed upon him. He spent one of the happiest hours he had ever known. Little Lettice made the tea, which seemed to Richard a very luxurious meal, and to which he did full justice. The Squire seemed to sympathize with the appetite of a healthy boy as well as with his other less material tastes. Indeed, his sympathy was surprising, and completely won Richard's heart. All three of them talked incessantly, and it was with a start of dismay that Richard heard the tall clock in the corner chime six, and realized that his hour of enjoyment had run its course.

A shadow came over his face as he rose from his seat. "I'm afraid I must be going."

"Won't you stay with us a little longer?" urged the Squire. "Lettice does not go to bed until seven. We thought you would like to help us get the books into better order. Filmer has done it very cleverly on the whole, but I want to make some alterations."

"I should like to very much indeed," said Richard, "but father told me to come home in an hour's time."

"Then I won't keep you now," said the Squire, "but mind you come and see us very often. Come to-morrow morning and tell us what you have been able to do about the pony."

Richard took his leave and went out. As he walked

home his mind was in a turmoil. It was all so strange and new and delightful to him. The beautiful luxurious house, in which he had been made to feel at home and which he had been told was free to him as often as he liked to come. Still more the charming, friendly child whose daintiness and delicate beauty was like nothing feminine he had ever come across in his life; and the courteous old man who treated him as an equal, and had shown plainly that he liked and trusted him. One would have had to be brought up in a loveless home such as had fallen to Richard's lot to realize fully the strength of the impression made on a susceptible mind by an experience common enough to more favoured mortals, but to him entirely new. One envies him as he treads the springy turf of the forest track under the evening sky of palest daffodil, young and avid of sensation, his heart stirred by the wonderful discovery of love and kindness, hitherto unknown, opening out to him; so well dowered was he by nature to give and receive the best that the world had to offer in the way of companionship and affection.

Happy thoughts went with him till he entered his home. Then a cold shadow seemed to descend and cut him off from the brightness in which he had been moving. He felt a fierce sensation of revolt against the normal conditions of his home life, now revealed to him as grey and sunless, and against the schooling he was to undergo at the hands of his father. He gave himself no time to think, but knocked at the study door, his lips set and a frown on his face.

John Baldock was seated at the desk where he sucked in as much theology as would have made him as saintly a man as any to be found in England, if theology and the spirit of Christianity were interchangeable terms.

He shut up his book as Richard stood before him, defiant and dark-browed.

"Well," he said, in what may be best described as a nasty way, "that is a pleasant face to bring before me!"

His tone goaded the boy into rudeness. "I'm used to being blamed and bullied for nothing," he said hotly. "But you can't expect me to look pleasant about it." He had never spoken to his father in that way before, and half repented the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. But his soul was sore within him, and he strung himself up to the encounter that was to follow.

John Baldock's face never altered, which even in the blindness of his passion gave Richard a slight shock of surprise, for he had expected a violent retort. "I think that you forget that you are talking to your father," he said.

"No, I don't," cried the boy. "I'm not likely to forget it. Nobody but my father is always on the look-out to find fault with me, and enjoys doing it. Other boys have fathers and mothers who love them and praise them if they do well. You've never praised me all my life, and whatever I do you're on the look-out to find something wrong in it. You don't help me. You hardly ever even speak kindly to me. I believe you're really pleased when you can find something to punish me for. You've been like that ever since I can remember. Now I'm growing older—and—I'm not going—I—you ought not to treat me like you do."

By the time he had come to the end of his poured-out bitterness he was in angry tears. His father still looked at him quietly, apparently moved neither by his passion nor his rebellious utterance, very different in

tone from anything he had ever heard from him before.

It was a curious character, this harsh and narrow-minded Churchman's. For fifteen years he had ridden roughshod over the sensibilities of his son, exhibiting abundant pettiness in his attitude of almost constant criticism, giving rein to his warped inclination to find fault and to domineer. So long as he had been able to do this without meeting opposition he had been very nearly completely satisfied with himself; not quite satisfied always, as we have already seen, but it had only been very rarely that he had been pulled up in this disagreeable course of action. Now, confronted with mutinous attack, he was a different man altogether.

"These are very serious charges you bring against me," he said. "Have you thought them over carefully, as to whether they are quite justified?"

"Yes, I have," Richard broke out again. "I'm not always behaving badly; even you can't say that. Tell me once when you have ever praised me for behaving well."

"That is a foolish thing to ask. No good man expects praise for doing his duty. Whatever you expect of me, you need not expect that."

"I don't expect it. I only expect you not to look out for every little thing you can possibly blame me for."

"We will have no more general charges couched in disrespectful language. Until we get to the bottom of your cause of complaint against me, we will discuss the matter without heat or rudeness on either side. Your position seems to be that you are so satisfied with yourself that you resent me, your father to whom you owe obedience and respect, correcting you for what I consider faults of conduct."

"No, father," said Richard, in a quieter tone. "That isn't my position." He felt himself handicapped in the controversy, but his naturally logical mind and the sense which had been growing in him that his father treated him with harshness and unfairness, a sense now suddenly rendered acute by his late experience of a home where love and kindness reigned supreme, prepared him to concentrate his mind upon what he did feel sore about, and, now that the ice was broken, to state it with what clearness and insistence he could.

"Then what is your position?" asked his father. "It seems to me so, but I am willing to hear it expressed as you feel it."

"It is what I have said. You do take every opportunity of blaming me. Whether I do right or wrong there's always something. I never do——"

"Wait a minute. You say, whether you do right or wrong. Do you accuse me of blaming you for doing right?"

"You blame me for things that aren't wrong."

"Then you are to be the judge of what is right and wrong, and not I."

The boy looked puzzled for a moment. Then he made a motion as if to brush away some trivial obstacle. "I'm not a baby," he said. "All my life you have been telling me what is right and what is wrong. I know well enough if I've done something that's really wrong."

"Will you give me an instance, then, of my blaming you for something that isn't wrong?"

He gave a dreary little laugh. "I could give you plenty of instances of that, father," he said. "The very thing that you were angry with me for this afternoon—because I hadn't told you that I had seen Mr. Ventrey's little granddaughter this morning."

"That is not a very well chosen instance. What I was angry with you for was for answering me rudely when I spoke to you about it, for that and for other things of which I told you at the time."

"That came afterwards. You spoke angrily to me for not telling you, before I had said anything."

"And why didn't you tell me? Wouldn't it have been natural for you to tell me a thing like that when we came together at dinner? It must have been constantly in your mind. But the fact that you said nothing about it is a good example of the sort of resentful sulkiness you have displayed towards me now for some months past. Your answering rudely when I asked you is all part of that behaviour, and it was against that behaviour that my anger, if you like to call it anger, was directed."

Richard felt the ground slipping from beneath his feet. "Resentful sulkiness," was an exaggerated description of his attitude towards his father of late, but it was near enough to be recognizable. "I can't argue about it like you can, father," he said, "but——"

"There is no question of ability to argue. You can tell me straightforwardly what is in your mind."

"I am trying to. I am sorry that I spoke rudely to you this afternoon, but what I said was true. I spoke to you about Mr. Ventrey and the Hall the other day, and you shut me up at once. I never know what I may talk about and what I mayn't. You do find fault with me if you possibly can. If I had told you about meeting that little girl this morning I am pretty certain you would have found fault with me for that, for some reason or other. I can't talk to you about things that interest me like other boys can to their fathers and mothers. I'm either snubbed or I'm blamed. You

tell me to be good but you don't help me to be. When I said that you never praised me for doing well I didn't mean quite that. I don't want you to praise me. But I don't think it would do me much harm if you were just to show that you were pleased with me. It's simply this, that when I'm not doing as well as I might you've got something to blame me for, and when I'm doing my best you blame me for any little thing that you find against me all the same. It doesn't make much difference. You never show that you're pleased with me. I suppose because you never are."

"Do you think what you are saying is quite true, Richard?"

"Yes; it is true."

"I think not. Although there may be a modicum of truth in it. Possibly in my watchfulness over your character I may have been over-anxious to root out faults. I mean that the way I have gone about to root them out may not have been the best I could have used. Being mortal and infested with sin, the most careful of us may make mistakes in the way we exercise responsibility. But is it not true that from the time you first began to go to school, from the time of your visit to your aunt's and after what then occurred, that we were happy together, that we talked of many things from time to time as father and son should, that there was confidence between us, that work went smoothly, and that this state of things, which I admit has now come to an end, continued until a few months ago?"

This point of view was new and somewhat surprising to Richard. "I don't want to be ungrateful to you, father," he said. "You certainly were kinder after that. But I don't think there was quite so much dif-

ference as you say. I always had to be very careful."

"Quite so. And I intend that you always shall be. I do not in the least regret anything I have ever done or said that would cause you to look on life and conduct seriously. And I am not the sort of parent, please God never shall be, who is content to share light and unworthy views of life with their children. Such parents may gain a poor reward for a short time. Their children, no doubt, have more freedom in their presence and may give them an increase of the sort of affection which I hold as worthless. But they will live to anathematize them; deservedly so, for such a training—or, rather, want of it—is a wicked misuse of the responsibilities of parentage. And now, Richard, I should like you to ask yourself this question. Has there been nothing in your conduct to produce the change which has come over our relationship? Have you been quite satisfied with yourself during the last six months? You have brought very severe charges against me for what you regard as undue severity towards you. Have you not some reason for being severe with yourself?"

Richard looked down on the floor; but did not answer.

"I will ask you the question again," said his father. "But first of all I want to say this. There are fathers to whom it is possible to be companions to their sons, to share such of their pursuits and recreations as are innocent, without losing sight of their parental responsibility in the way I have described. I am not one of them. My pursuits and yours are different, as our characters are different. We should both find a constant and close companionship irksome. You no less than I. But you will do me the justice to remember that you have had as large a measure of freedom as any boy of your own class, or indeed any class, you have

ever come across. I have never interfered with your outdoor pursuits, or objected to your spending your leisure in any way you pleased. You will acknowledge, I think, that is the case."

"Yes, father," said Richard.

"Then kindly take that into account when you are passing judgment upon me in your mind. And now I will repeat my question. You are right in saying that I have not been pleased with you during the past six months. You seem to do your work fairly well when you are immediately under my eye, but there is a very marked difference in the spirit in which you do it, and I need not remind you that the result at the end of last term was not satisfactory. I must say, too, that I have no expectation of its being more satisfactory at the end of this. I will say nothing more about your attitude to me during that time. I have been severe to you, you say. Granted. But you have resented my severity in a way you would not have done if there had not been cause for it. Now, am I not right?"

Another pause.

Then John Baldock, at last, by the grace of God hit the right note.

"Tell me what has been wrong, Richard, and let us try to put it right."

Instantly the boy dissolved into tears. "Come here," said his father, and he went round the table and stood by his chair with his hand on his shoulder and his father's arm encircling him.

He sobbed out his confession, not so very dreadful a confession after all. Even John Baldock, severe as was his normal attitude towards what he called worldly thoughts, and impatient with anything in the nature of literature, in which category he included, of course, all

fiction, was surprised that it amounted to nothing more than an overdose of novel-reading, not, strictly speaking, even surreptitious. But as the boy went on he realized something of how the matter stood with him, and set himself to elucidate it, with a tact which seemed to have descended for that purpose only, for it was as superior to the ordinary insight vouchsafed to him as possible.

"I think I see how it is," he said. "What you have done was very delightful at first, and could not be said to be definitely wrong in itself if you had not let your thoughts become engrossed in it. The reading of tales and stories I regard as absolute waste of valuable time. If you allow them to take hold of your mind they give you wrong views of life. I suppose if stories were written by Christian men and women it might not be so. But they are not. However, I should not expect you to hold that view at your age, and I should not seek to prevent your reading light books altogether as long as they were not definitely irreligious. I don't think you would want to read such books, and we need say no more on that point. But, like all things that have not to do with our eternal welfare, reading of that sort, if over indulged in, becomes a temptation, and, like all temptations, brings satiety at last. I think you have become very tired of your novel-reading."

"Yes, father. I don't want to go on with it any more."

"Very well. You are now in a position to see plainly why it has not brought you happiness. I don't accuse you of wilfully deceiving me about it, but you knew that I should not approve of the extent to which you carried it, and of course that has made you unhappy and explains much of the change in your attitude towards

me. For the change has been in you, Richard, and not in me. Then of course it has affected your work. Although you have not been actually idle in the times set apart for lessons or preparation, your mind has not been set on what are the chief duties of your life at present in the way it must be set if you are to succeed. The duties have become toilsome, you have known failure where before you had success, and you have become dissatisfied with yourself on that account. And lastly, I take it that you are dissatisfied with yourself because you have been accustomed to take an innocent pleasure in the life of the open air, and you have given up that pleasure for a far less satisfactory one. I am not on such sure ground here, because my interests in life are different, but I think to a certain extent I understand and sympathize. I have always, at any rate, been content that you should spend much of your time out of doors, and have felt that God might reveal Himself to you in the bounties of nature with which He has surrounded you, as He has revealed Himself to me in other ways. Only this afternoon I was saying to Mr. Ventrey that you knew and loved the forest as few of us who dwell in it do. Although it is a knowledge and love not to be compared with that given to God's Word or His service, it may indirectly lead to that. It is, I am assured, a healthy love and knowledge, and it should be treasured as a Gift and not lightly exchanged for something that, as you see, has brought unhappiness with it. You have come to feel that, and now that you are going to give up this indulgence, you will go back to your open-air pursuits with renewed pleasure."

Richard's hand stole round and rested on his father's other shoulder. "I wish I had told you about it before, father," he said.

"I wish you had, my boy," replied John Baldock, quite unconscious, so well had he played his part, that nothing less than the defiance with which the interview had started would have brought him into the mood to deal with the situation in the way he had done. "We could have talked it over and put an end to it much sooner. But it is at an end now, let us thank God's mercy for it, and shall come between us no longer. I shall never mention the subject again."

And he never did. He had won handsomely, and could afford to be generous. When he thought over the course of the conversation later that night he did ask himself whether there was any truth in the accusations the boy had brought against him, apart from the actual case under special discussion; but he was so taken with the eloquence and reasonableness he had brought to bear on the subject, and on its happy results, that the keenness of his inward vision was somewhat obscured. He decided that there was nothing in those accusations.

As for Richard, for the first time for many months he went to bed completely happy. He had purged his soul of the indulgence that had clogged it, and cherished a new feeling for his father made up of gratitude, admiration, and affection mixed. Then there was the Hall and the kind Squire and the charming child to think of, and nothing now to come between him and the enjoyment of these new delights. His heart was as light as a feather, and he fell asleep with a smile on his lips.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT BEECHURST HALL

MR. VENTREY was dressing for dinner with the assistance of the staid and respectable Filmer. Master and man were very good friends. The one liked to talk and the other to listen. Mr. Ventrey was talking now, and Filmer was listening, throwing in from time to time a small but well-considered contribution to the conversation, the subject of which was Richard, who had left the house an hour or two before.

"It was a risk, Filmer," Mr. Ventrey was saying. "I said to myself, 'The child cannot have made a mistake. No child does when it is a question of character; least of all my little Lettice.' But when I saw the father—that hard, ignorant bigot, whom, nevertheless, Filmer, we must be careful to support, and, if possible, to humanize—I confess I felt doubtful."

"Your kindness of heart, sir, is proverbial."

"Thank you, Filmer. Directly I set eyes on the boy I knew that there had been no mistake. What a charming open face! I should have liked to have a son like that. Those clear eyes—nothing to conceal in the heart to which they are the windows, Filmer."

"A pretty thought, sir."

"Thank you, Filmer. Perhaps just a slight shadow now, but I found out the reason for that, and we shall disperse it. Do you know, Filmer, what gives a boy a look like that—open and honest and fearless?"

"I should be pleased to be informed, sir."

"Then I will inform you. It is the look that is produced only by the open-air life, by constant companionship with Nature. It is the look that Nature imprints upon the faces of her votaries. You cannot get it from poring over books, Filmer; you cannot even get it by observation of humankind. It is the look that Adam had before he was driven out of the Garden. The look of innocence, of knowledge of good before there comes knowledge of evil. I don't bear it, though I think I had it once; and you don't bear it, Filmer."

"No, sir."

"We know the world. We have eaten of the Tree, and we have found some of the fruit bitter and some sweet. One of the sweetest fruits, Filmer, is the ability to recognize innocence and goodness, and to love it. I am thankful that from the wreck of my bodily powers that and many other good things have been preserved to me. I think you have the ability too, Filmer."

"I believe so, sir."

"You would not remain very long with me if it were not so, for you are most infernally clumsy. I could have tied that tie in half the time if I had had the use of both my hands. Please be a little more expeditious. I am hungry, for a wonder. I suppose it is the forest air. I almost wish, Filmer, that we had come here sooner."

"You would have missed the hintercourse, sir."

"Yes, I should have missed the hintercourse, as you say. Possibly I shall miss it. But I think not. My mind is stored. And there will be great compensations. My little Lettice—I shall see her sweet nature grow and expand before my eyes. She is wise beyond her years, and she is of the age to go straight to the heart of those mysteries which are hidden from the eyes of

some of the wisest. This young wood-god will initiate her. In my most sanguine moments I never hoped that I should have found so good a guide. A girl could not have done it. There would have been a conflict of interests and desires, however genuine the knowledge and love. And a man, the best man one could imagine for the purpose, would play the schoolmaster. A boy, frank and clean-minded, unspotted from the world—one might have hoped to come across such a one if one had thought of it; but boys to whom one could trust our little fairy must be rare. I hope, Filmer, you share my enthusiasm on this fortunate discovery."

"The young gentleman, so far as I have been able to ascertain, is liked by all."

"We must make his life happy, Filmer. We are fortunate to be in a position to do something in that way. If you get nothing else for your faithful service to me, Filmer, and I think it very likely that you will not—for, upon my word, you are the most irritating bungler in existence—you will have got this, that the best way to gain happiness for yourself is to do what you can to give it to somebody else."

"I've got the best example of it before my eyes, sir."

"It is very nice of you to say so, Filmer. I am quite sure that we shall be happy here. If we do miss the hindercourse there is plenty to console us for it. By the way, are you quite sure of Dourçy?"

"He had the very highest of recommendations, sir."

"I hope they were deserved. We are drawing near to a very great test. If your clumsy fingers permit you to finish dressing me, in ten minutes I shall be beginning my first dinner cooked by Monseieur Dourçy. The first dinner in a new house designed and prepared by a new cook. The occasion is a momentous one.

The little supper last night was excellent, and promised well. But to-night's dinner will be the crucial test. If you are sure you have quite finished, Filmer, you may take me downstairs. I hope when you bring me up again I shall not have suffered a great disappointment."

Richard was astir early the next morning. The pony he had in his mind as being the most suitable for little Lettice's use belonged to a forester who lived some miles away, and he was in the stable-yard saddling his own pony to go and fetch it soon after seven o'clock. Job, who had just arrived, was also in the yard.

"I hear you made friends along o' the Squire already," he remarked.

"Yes," said Richard. "I don't think I've ever met a gentleman I liked so much."

"Ho!" replied Job. "Seemingly he ain't a Roman Catholic, as we was informed."

"I don't know. I never thought about it."

"It all come o' these here women. 'Tain't often I believe what they says, an' never shan't again. Roman Catholic, indeed! Young Master Harry! I think I sees *him* bowing down to graven images. Not much I don't; though bowing down to anything in Heaven or earth's beyond him now, poor soul."

"What do you mean? Who are you talking about?"

"Seems to me I'm going dotty. Though what with Acts o' Parliament and such like, 'tain't to be expected a plain man should have known."

Richard went into the harness room and came out with his bridle, which he fitted on without a word.

"I suppose you haven't heard, then," proceeded Job, disappointed of a question, which he would have ignored.

"I've heard all there is to hear."

"That I'll lay you haven't. This same Squire Ventrey, what we've all been talking about as if he was a heathen foreigner, p'raps you'll tell me who he really is?"

"Perhaps you'll tell me."

"I will. He's no other than young Master Harry Sherwood, what I've gone bird's-nesting and such-like pranks many's the time along of 'im, when I was a nipper myself. And that's gospel, if the sky was to fall and bury me."

"How does his name come to be Ventrey, then?"

"That's Act o' Parliament, and to be found written in the laws of the land. Miss Ventrey, what owned the Hall when I was a lad, she left it to him with her name and all; and the Lords and Commons they sat in judgment, and had him named afresh, accordingly, swearing on the book as is commanded. We pieced it together last night, me and one or two more at 'The Chequers,' after we'd seed him and knowed him for what he was. And a good Squire we shall have, legs or no legs, as kind-hearted a gentleman as ever drew the breath of life, and bold and soaring in spirit though afflicted in body."

"When did you see him? He didn't go out yesterday. He told me so himself."

"Young Tasker, what's been taken on at the gardens, come into 'The Chequers' last night. 'Come up to the Hall and see a great sight,' he says. A simple young man he is, and questions was lost on him, being exalted in spirit. 'Come and see a sight of splendour,' he says. So we followed of him, and them as wouldn't go without knowing what they was going for was left behind. When we got into the gardens behind the Hall—trespassin' you might call it if you was so minded—

there was three windows alight from top to bottom an' never a blind to one of them. 'Don't show yourselves, neighbours,' says young Tasker, 'but feast your eyes on the glorious sight from behind this here bush.' So we did, and what do you think we saw?"

"I suppose you saw Mr. Ventrey eating his dinner."

"'Twas not like mortal man a-satisfying of his natural appetite. There was vessels of gold and vessels of silver, and candles and fine linen, and at the table sat the Squire with his weskit wide open against the time there come repletion. And a coming and going of men-servants there was constant and quiet, three grown men to serve him on bended knee."

"Oh, come now, Job!"

"Was my eyes blessed by the wondrous sight, or was they not? First one would hand him a shining dish o' victuals and another the belongings thereto, and then the chief of them, with his shirt uncovered to keep his master in countenance, would come forward with a bottle of crystal and pour out the precious liquor. Then they would stand still and solemn and watch every mouthful, and him a-settin' there calm and majestic, chew, chew, chew, like a king on his throne. The multitude of dishes was a marvel to behold, and after each one was ate the plate was whisked away like magic, and another clean and shining set down in front of him. Once the good food didn't please him and was took away with whispers and melancholy sighing. But the next dish was asked for again and happiness shone on the faces of the solemn assembly. We was struck dumb with astonishment at the wonders we beheld and our bones was like water. Then all of a sudden old Jacob Biddleton, what was groom in the stables in the days of old Miss Ventrey, he slaps his leg, and says: 'By the Lord,

neighbours, that great potentate's young Mr. Harry, and no other.' And what I'd been groping for in my own dark brain came to light at his words, and the truth was revealed to me at that moment. 'You're right, Jacob,' says I. 'Cut off the beard of the man, turn his white hair black, and give the poor soul the use of his limbs, and there's Master Harry Sherwood before us all.' And Tom Hendry knew the man for what he was too, and Fred Doe, and we was all in a flutter. I suppose the babel of our voices was uplifted more than was fit, for something was said and all eyes in the room was turned to the windows, and the chief butler he come and looked out, but we had drawn back and was crouching behind the bush. Then he drew down the blinds and the glory inside was hidden from us. So we went back to 'The Chequers,' and there we made out what I told you."

"You're a funny old thing, Job. Tell me what Mr. Ventrey was like when he was young."

"Like none I've ever seen afore or since. Sometimes solemn and quiet and as wise as a judge, wi' talk no man could understand outside a pulpit. And the next day, perhaps, as daring and wild as old Nick himself, surpassing all in devilry and miscalling you to your face enough to bring tears of mortification to the eyes of such as had tender spirits. But at the end of all as loving as a woman, and knowed what was in the mind of each one same as it was his own. A wonderful character, and all of us as was then young and now is old, and them as has gone down to the grave since them days of youthhood, wild to follow him wherever he went, and many a sore heart left behind when he ran away to foreign parts and his name blotted out for ever."

"Ran away?"

"Yes. Him and Miss Ventrey had a misunderstanding, so we heard, but never the rights of it. Proud they were and high-spirited, both of them, and words there was occasional, though she loved him and he loved her. Last we heard of him he was in the Crimea a-fighting the Prooshians, and never no more. They must have made it up before she died, which was thirty years ago and more, and why he's never come back to the old house till now is beyond my knowing. Happen it was the stroke that made him ashamed to face his old companions, though a might ha' known, poor soul, that that would be forgiven him, and him an old man an' all now, same as them he left in the pride of youth."

"It's very interesting, Job. I'll tell him that you remember him, for I'm going there this morning."

"Aye, do so, Master Richard. I'll be proud to touch my hat to he, which is more than I've done to gentle or simple this forty year, for my soul's my own, and I don't hold wi' idolatry. But Master Harry's different, and it's a bright day for Beechurst now he's back come among us."

Richard mounted his pony and clattered out of the yard. He had known Job Wilding all his life, but had never heard him put so many words together in so short a time before, and had hardly ever known him to speak with approbation, much less enthusiasm, of any living soul. It is not to be wondered at that what he had seen and heard of the Squire made a deep impression upon his mind, and occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of almost everything else. Even little Lettice seemed of less importance in the coming changes in his life than her grandfather, and with the clearing up of

the cloud between him and his own father, which would otherwise have given him ample food for thought, he occupied himself not at all.

He found the owner of the pony he had come for, extracted and adjusted a price from him, and rode back with it to the vicarage, whence in due time he presented himself at the Hall.

The weather was still fine and warm, and Mr. Ventrey was out in his chair, being wheeled by Filmer and accompanied by Lettice. Richard eyed him somewhat closely as he greeted him, adjusting his first impressions to the new light he had received on his character. Had it not been for Job's reminiscences he would have been more surprised than he was to find that the kindly gravity of his host's manner of the evening before had disappeared, and a gay, almost irresponsible light-heartedness had taken its place, impossible to resist.

"Filmer," he said, "you shall ride the pony down to the gate and back again. There is no one but you whose judgment I can trust in these matters." And the unfortunate Filmer's protestations of incompetence were brushed away until he was on the point of mounting the bare-backed pony, when he was forbidden to do any such thing. Richard cantered the pony down the drive and back again, and Lettice was lifted on to it and given her first lesson. Then they went into a paddock, men were summoned, and a low fence was set up and the pony's jumping capabilities tested. The Squire was as keenly interested as a boy, urged Richard to bolder feats and applauded his successes, and kept the children merry and excited all the time. Richard was fascinated by an attitude so delightful and, in his experience, so unprecedented in a grown-up person, and

little Lettice's bird-like laughter rose continuously into the warm sweet air.

The pony was finally approved of, the groom summoned and given instructions as to saddlery, and dismissed with the new purchase to the stables, and the trio spent the rest of the morning in the gardens, Richard pushing Mr. Ventrey's chair, *vice* Filmer, dismissed to other duties.

"Your father is coming to lunch," said the Squire, as they went indoors, and a shadow descended on Richard's spirit, only partially lifted by the remembrance of what had happened between them the evening before.

But if his admiration of his new friend had been great before, it rose to the point of wonderment when he found himself sitting opposite to his father at the luncheon table, and watched him gradually thawed from his usual state of sombre stiffness through the stages of ease and geniality into an almost complete forgetfulness of himself and his position of authority. It was not the fine food and the wine that were offered to him that produced the change, for the one he consumed without appreciation, and the other he refused with a hint of horror in his manner. It was the consummate tact of his host in whom Richard now saw a third stranger related to the other two whose acquaintance he had made that morning and the evening before only by his very manifest kindness and sympathy. Remembering Job's description of the elaborate dinner of the night before, Richard was rather surprised to see his host wave away the wine which was about to be poured into his glass, and content himself through the meal with plain water. He was still more surprised to find that a matter of almost absorbing interest to Mr. Ventrey was the work of the church in the village of

Beechurst, a matter on which his father was encouraged to talk more freely than he had ever known him do before. Somehow he had not expected to find the Squire deeply interested in religious matters, and indeed with the clearness of perception possessed by youth it occurred to him even now that the interest was not quite so genuine as his father evidently believed it to be. But he put away the thought as savouring of disloyalty, for his admiration of this delightful and friendly newcomer was full and flowing over. He could hardly keep his eyes from him as he talked, and the little girl who sat between them at the round table was almost as much engrossed in her grandfather as himself.

Mr. Ventrey was not the man to allow one guest, even the most important, to monopolize his attention. Richard was brought into the conversation and little Lettice too, and in such a way that John Baldock, who would have ignored both of them throughout the meal if he had been allowed, found himself addressing affable remarks not only to his son, but to a child almost too small to have come otherwise into the focus of his intelligence.

When luncheon was over Richard and Lettice went out into the garden, while Mr. Ventrey had himself wheeled into the library and asked the Vicar to accompany him.

"I must tell you," he said, "what a pleasure it is to me to find such neighbours near me. I cannot, unfortunately, get very far away from the house, and, if I remember rightly there are none except your own within very easy reach. When I used to come here many years ago the then Vicar of Beechurst was not the most engaging of companions, and it is a great relief to me to find the old order changed in that respect."

"My predecessor was a godless reprobate," replied John Baldock, "who prostituted his high office, and was sunk very deep in the mire of self-indulgence; and even, if I am rightly informed, committed crimes for which he might have been made amenable to the law."

"I didn't know that it was as bad as that," said Mr. Ventrey, "but he was certainly not fit to be asked to a gentleman's table. It is a matter for congratulation to me that I find things so altered."

"I may say, without undue boasting, that things *are* altered in the village," said the Vicar, "although they are far from being as I would have them. It is a great joy to me, Mr. Ventrey, on my side, that you are able to see eye to eye with me in these matters and that I may look forward to a valuable and loyal co-operation in my endeavours to raise the spiritual condition of those committed to my charge."

"Quite so," responded Mr. Ventrey, cordially. "I fear I shall not be able to attend your services, much as I could have wished to support you in that way. But you see my disabilities."

"Possibly," said the Vicar, with a glance at his chair, "some device might be——"

Mr. Ventrey did not appear to have heard him. "But anything that I can do in the way of money—poor as such a contribution is beside your own sacrifice of time and labour—I shall consider myself honoured in being allowed to do. And we must be friends, Mr. Baldock. You must come and see me whenever you feel so inclined, and tell me how I can help you; not only what I can do for your parishioners, but if there is anything I can do for yourself. I am an older man than you, and to tell you the honest truth, I like meddling with my neighbours' affairs."

He spoke lightly, but there was no disguising the sincerity with which the offer was made. John Baldock was touched by it. "I do not despise kind and wise advice," he said, with unwonted humility, "although I live so much alone that it is not often it is available. I thank you, Mr. Ventrey."

"And your boy," proceeded the Squire. "I cannot tell you how I have taken to him. He seems to me just what a boy of that age ought to be, frank and winning and healthy. You are very fortunate in having such a son, Mr. Baldock."

The Vicar swallowed something, possibly the knowledge that he had not considered himself over fortunate in his son. "He has the seeds of good in him," he said.

"He has the fruits," corrected the Squire. "What are you going to make of him, Mr. Baldock? Excuse the direct question. I only ask it because I am more than usually interested in him."

"I hope that he will follow in my footsteps and give his life to preaching the Gospel."

"Ah! well, he is young yet. I hope you will let him come here as often as he wishes. It will not be more often than I and my little granddaughter wish."

"Thank you," said John Baldock. "As long as he behaves becomingly and does not trespass on your kindness I shall be glad to do so."

The Vicar soon afterwards took his departure, and Mr. Ventrey summoned Filmer to wheel him out into the garden.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SQUIRE TALKS

It was fortunate for Richard that a better understanding with his father had come just at the time at which his new friendship began. Otherwise he would hardly have been allowed to spend day after day and sometimes long evenings at the Hall without having to surmount considerable difficulties at home. As it was, he came and went unchecked, and throughout the three weeks of his Easter holidays was so happy that even his father was touched with some warmth of feeling towards him, for steady happiness of spirit is powerful to rouse affection.

Richard taught little Lettice to ride, and they spent long hours together in the forest. She was a sweet-natured, confiding little soul, and the boy came to love her dearly. She was an apt pupil. She would take his arm and snuggle up to his side, and say: "Tell me secrets, Dick," and Richard would dive into his experience and fish up something that he had observed or assimilated in his lifelong familiarity with the ways of nature.

"See," he would say, "how do you think the great oaks and beeches grew so big?"

"The oak comes from an acorn and the beech——"

"Yes; but when the acorns and the beech nuts have planted themselves in the ground and sprouted and grown into little trees, the cattle eat them and the deer. If you were to plant an oak in a field where

cattle were grazing, you would have to protect it, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Very well, then. Now see how the oak is prepared for in the forest. Here's a bramble growing. What else is there?"

"A thorn."

"Yes. Well, one day a little hawfinch perched on a spray of the bramble and dropped the seed for the thorn to grow from. And why do you think that grew without being barked by the rabbits?"

The child thought for a moment and clapped her hands. "Because the bramble would prick their soft little noses," she said.

"Yes. Now we'll go and find a bigger thorn. Here is one; and what is growing with it?"

"A holly."

"Yes. Right in the middle of the thorn. Well, one day, when the thorn was growing big a perky old black-bird came and perched on it and dropped a holly berry. And here are all three together. A thorn—sometimes it's a wild pear or a sloe—a holly and an oak. And the oak has grown much bigger than them all. That was from an acorn dropped from the holly by a wood-pigeon. And so you see everything has been protected by what grew before it until it was big enough to look after itself. The cattle won't prick themselves with thorns and hollies, and so they leave the oak alone till it grows too high to be reached. Then it begins to shoulder out the thorns and the hollies. But you will very seldom find a young oak growing without one of them near enough to protect it."

"That's a beautiful secret, Richard. How did you find it out?"

"I don't know. I thought about it till it came to me."

"Tell me another."

He took her to the higher ground, where the Bag-shot sand joined the clay, and showed her how the water, filtering down to the heavy ground, oozed out from the juncture in springs and rivulets. Here the oaks abounded. "Because," said the wise Richard, "the pigeons come up here to drink, and wherever the pigeons go they drop the acorns."

Many other secrets he told her as they roamed the forest together during those happy April days, and for nearly two years afterwards, during which they were inseparable companions in his hours of leisure. He showed her the seeds of the sycamore spun round and round as they floated down the wind on their flange-like wings. "You would think it was a brown moth," he said. "And the birds think so too, and swoop down upon it. Then, when they have flown a little way, they find out their mistake and drop it, quite disgusted. So the seed gets carried, and little sycamores spring up a long way from the big old mother sycamore."

He taught her the names of birds, and their notes, and told her where they built, so that her eyes became as clever at spying a nest and naming the builder as his own. Everything he had learnt about the forest and its denizens of the undergrowth, the thicket, and the higher dwelling places of the air he taught her in time; but not always easily, for he did not know how much he knew himself, until he came to put it into words, nor what was plain to the eye and what had to be explained. But the telling of it gave his knowledge a value in his own eyes that it had never had before, and his love of

the forest and the secrets it enshrined gathered force by expression.

Sometimes they quarrelled, for Lettice was wilful, and no more than the best or worst of her sex could put up with a long period of unbroken agreement. But she loved Richard all the same, and admired him with never wavering constancy in spite of her occasional fits of antagonism, for he was the wisest of mortals in her eyes and held the keys of all knowledge worth having. And he for his part would have gone through fire and water for her, although even if she had been old enough to appreciate his devotion, she would never have suspected it, for he treated her as a comrade and kept the tenderness he felt for her locked closely in his innermost heart, as became a healthy-minded boy not yet called by his years to the single attachment.

His devotion to the Squire, though different in quality, was no less strong. He never quite understood him, and indeed the complexities of Mr. Ventrey's character were such as to have puzzled a more experienced brain than his. But of one thing at least there could be no doubt, that whenever Richard presented himself at the Hall he was made welcome, and that the invariable kindness displayed towards him sprang from a genuine liking and even affection. The increase of happiness brought into Richard's life by his friendship with the Squire and little Lettice could hardly be exaggerated. It was caused not only by the pleasant companionship and the free entry into a beautiful, luxuriously ordered house, with its manifold interests and attractions, though these were not without their effect on a mind singularly open to impressions, and especially so in comparison with the meagreness of the social life he had hitherto experienced. It was caused chiefly by the security he felt

in the liking so plainly shown for him by his new friends. No one had ever before shown that they took great pleasure in his society—no one, at least, whose liking was a tribute to be proud of. It was what he wanted to give him confidence in himself. His whole being craved for affection. He had never known it in his home life. No wonder that a constant felicity underlay his intercourse with those who showed that they considered themselves as much the gainers by him as he by them.

If Richard never quite understood his friend and benefactor, it was not for any reservations practised on him by Mr. Ventrey himself. The Squire seemed to take a delight in revealing the springs of his actions to him and inculcating a philosophy of life which would have been cynical if the mainspring of his nature had not been that ever fresh and abounding good will towards mankind at large which no experience of ingratitude and no insistent demand for pleasure and sensation in his own life were strong enough to lessen. Richard would sometimes dine alone with him, sharing a refection the rarity and elaboration of which struck him every time he took part in it with scarcely less wonder than had been described to him by Job as the experience of himself and his cronies. Then they would retire to the library, and the Squire would talk and Richard would listen for an hour until it was time for him to go home to bed.

"Life is given to us to enjoy," said Mr. Ventrey to him on one of these occasions. "And I believe that every man, whatever his position, has means to his hands to enjoy it. But enjoyment is an art which needs as much education and practice as any other. And remember this, my Richard, that there is no such

thing as solitary enjoyment. Give out as freely as you can to others and you will enhance a hundredfold the value of what you have for yourself."

"Father says that our life here must be one of self-sacrifice."

"I have the greatest possible respect for your father and for the principles by which his life is guided. But one can only go by one's experience, and mine tells me otherwise. There are probably people in the world who find a pleasure in self-sacrifice for its own sake, just as there are people who like to stick knives into themselves. I imagine that they have to educate themselves up to these pleasures, as one does to every pleasure that is worth having. But I think that one is as unnatural as the other. Love I take to be a higher motive from which to confer happiness on others than self-sacrifice; and there can be no doubt that it is more satisfactory to receive attentions from a person who has a regard for you than from one who looks upon you as a convenient object upon which to practise his own virtue. I would go even further, and say that benefits conferred without love are not benefits at all, but rather insults. I should certainly feel them to be so if they were conferred upon me."

"But it is not everybody who—who loves other people like you do, Mr. Ventrey."

"Perhaps I have the capacity for good will towards mankind at large more highly developed than some. But you do not suppose, my Richard, that such a capacity, if it exists in the first place, does not need to be fostered and encouraged. Everybody possesses some measure of it, and they had far better try to enlarge their sympathies than begin at the other end and play the benefactor by rule without possessing

beneficence of character. After all, happiness is the test—as far as I can see, the only test that lies ready to one's hand. Even the people who make themselves miserable in this world of set purpose do so because they look forward to another world in which their present misery will gain them happiness; and no doubt it gives them some satisfaction to feel that their happiness will be greater than that of us poor mortals who practise the cult of happiness here and now. They are welcome to their satisfaction. The mistake they make is in believing that all who seek happiness now are alike in thinking that it can be gained by selfish pleasure. We are not all fools, we others. The wiser among us know very well that the pursuit of selfish pleasure does not bring happiness; we know it as well as they do, and the more we act on our knowledge the happier we become."

Richard was somewhat puzzled by this demonstration of a philosophy which had some points of resemblance with that to which he had been brought up, but an entirely different starting ground. "Do you think, then," he said, "that we may enjoy ourselves as much as we can in this world if we take care not to let our enjoyment interfere with other people's happiness?"

"I think," said Mr. Ventrey, "that that is what we are here for. But we must not be content with a negative interest in other people's happiness. We must promote it; and we must do so because it is perfectly plain to every sensible and experienced seeker after happiness for himself that that is one of the chief means by which he can gain it. Man is a social animal. He gains by giving. I have said enough on that point. Although it is the chief it is not the only means of acquiring happiness. You must cultivate as many tastes as

you can, always supposing that you have the means and opportunity of gratifying them."

"But a poor man can't afford to have many tastes."

"He can afford to have the best. The pleasures that money can buy are never the greatest. I do not say they are not worth having, but they need the greatest possible care in the using if they are to be permanent pleasures. In fact you must have educated yourself into the position of an expert if you are to get any real pleasure out of them at all. None of your own pleasures, for instance, have any relation whatever to money. The pleasure you take in the open-air life and the beauty of the world in which you live does not depend in the least upon money. It has never cost you a penny."

"But I might have to go away and live in a town where I could not enjoy that particular pleasure."

"I am glad to see that you are exercising your mind on the question. In that case you would have to adjust your mind to do without it, and find something to take its place."

"Then money would come in, because if I were rich I could live where I liked—when I grew up, I mean."

"And lose the pleasure of work, which, when you grow up, you will find means a great deal more to you than the money it brings. But the point now is that, taking yourself as an example, the pleasures you actually have the means of enjoying do not depend upon money, and they are good pleasures, which you will value the more as you grow older. You love books, but you do not want to buy them—yet. You can read as much as you like, and you have already found out that that particular pleasure must be indulged in with

discretion, like all others, as I have told you, or it remains a pleasure no longer. You have the capacity for friendship, and you have friends who satisfy it. I hope, at least, that Lettice and I satisfy it."

"But, Mr. Ventrey, I hadn't many friends before you came, and it is not very long since I had books to read."

"Then you have had two additional pleasures conferred on you over and above those you enjoyed before. You have them now, and my point is that every one, or at any rate the great majority of people, do have opportunities of happiness if they are prepared to take them and to use them wisely. Please get it out of your head that money is necessary for happiness, or that it is even the chief means of obtaining happiness. There are other means of such infinitely greater importance. Health, for instance. Don't you think that I would give up every luxury or pleasure that my money procures me in exchange for what you and the vast majority of people in the world have, and make so little of—the power to use my limbs, to do things for myself, to walk?"

It was the first time that Richard had heard him refer to his affliction. He did so now without a trace of self-consciousness, with an easy smile, as if it were of little account. But the boy saw, in a flash of enlightenment, what the deprivation he suffered under might mean to such a man, and his voice was a little husky as he replied: "And yet you are happy, Mr. Ventrey."

"Yes. I don't think of it. I don't mind saying to you, what I wouldn't say to many people, because they wouldn't believe me, that I don't mind. At first, of course, I did. One needs time to adjust oneself to

entirely new conditions of life, and it would be difficult to imagine a more complete change than that produced by a severe stroke of paralysis. What do you think I was doing when the blow came to me? I will tell you, because it may be useful to you to remember me as an example of a man who at one time or another has had nearly everything that made life worth living cut away from him, and has yet attained happiness and contentment in spite of his losses.

“I was about to set out on a journey of exploration. It was before the sources of the Nile were discovered, and if this had not happened to me I think I should have had the honour of discovering them. This journey had been a dream of mine for many years. I will tell you some day of all the preparations I had made for it. It was the thirst for knowledge and something unknown, and the spirit of adventure, both of them very strong with me, which made me set my heart on this expedition and work for it through many years. First of all I had had to make money, for, as your friend and my old friend Job Wilding told you, I cut myself loose from my home ties at an early age. I had made the money not only for this enterprise but enough to last me through my life once some years before, and had been robbed of it. Then I had to set to work again and I was fortunate and made more than enough again in a shorter time. So everything seemed golden. I was in the very prime of life, my experience was riper, and my zest for the undertaking only increased. Then came the stroke, and my life was broken into little fragments, for I had concentrated myself on one object which was now lost to me for ever.”

Richard listened breathless to this recital, delivered in a calm even voice. The Squire stopped for a moment,

and went on in the same tone of unembittered reminiscence.

"I do not know how long it took me, looking back on it all now, to adjust myself completely to such absolutely changed conditions. I realized very soon that unless I did so the rest of my life would be spoilt and I did not intend that that should be. I set my whole mind to the task, and succeeded. I think I have even mastered regret, though that was not the work of a day, or of a year. I believe there is nothing that a man may not do with his mind if he sets himself to it. I can only tell you, my friend Richard, that you see before you a man whose whole outlook in life has been changed more than once, who has nevertheless determined that he will be happy to the end of his days; and who *is* happy and contented."

Richard went home that night with something to think about. He was nearing the age of sixteen, and his childhood was passing away from him. The age at which a boy looks forward into the future and sees the time at which he shall have embarked upon the life and work of his manhood so far ahead that the intervening years seem almost limitless, was coming to an end for him, though as yet he possessed nothing more than a glimmering of the responsibility that would presently lie with himself as to his future.

He thought about it to-night as he walked home under the stars. What sort of life was it that was mapped out for him? For the next three years he would go on as he was doing now. Those years would be full of interest. He would climb to the top of the little republic of his school. His home life, always interesting to him in spite of its limitations, would be rich in pleasure because of this friends at the Hall. After that would

come Oxford or Cambridge, and three or four years of a life that appeared to him the most delightful that a young man could lead. What should come later was so very far away that until now he had never actually brought his mind to bear upon it. He did so to-night, not without effort, for the remoteness of twenty-three to a boy of fifteen is immense. He pictured his state as a clergyman as resembling that of his father, omitting the preliminary years of subordinate preparation, and ignoring the system of patronage in the Church of England and the possibility of none being conferred upon him.

The outlook was not an unpleasant one. Supposing himself to be filling a position such as that of his father, the pursuits which he now enjoyed would not be denied him. He would have to preach sermons, and he thought he might like to do so. None of the work of a clergyman that he could call to mind would be distasteful to him. What, then, was the reason for the shrinking that lay in the back of his mind and coloured his thoughts? He recognized that the shrinking existed, tried to trace its cause and could not. Then he withdrew his mind from its effort. There were years and years before him of a life that he knew, and anticipated with pleasure. No need to look beyond it—the ability even to look beyond it being very small for a boy of his age. He dismissed the subject without difficulty, and thought of Mr. Ventrey and the glimpses he had given him of his early life.

But he had faced the problem for the first time, however incompletely, and the time was coming when he would have to face it to some purpose.

CHAPTER XX

A COUNTESS AND A CONJURER

THERE is no need to linger over the next two years of Richard's life, which flowed evenly. His friendship with Mr. Ventrey and little Lettice continued, and was responsible for the chief interests of his life. The Squire lived for the most part at the Hall all the year round. Sometimes he went to London or to Paris for a few weeks, and took Lettice with him. Once he went to Egypt for three months; Richard found Beechurst very dull in consequence. Guests came and went at the Hall, and Richard's knowledge of men and women was widened by meeting people of every variety of fame and achievement, for most of them to whom the Squire extended his hospitality were of some account in the world, and he saw to it that the boy should meet them all. Some of them took a good deal of notice of him, and some ignored him. Some would talk of their experiences, and he would listen open-mouthed. Others, perhaps the most famous, refused to talk at all, at least about themselves, but, knowing who they were and what they had done, he regarded them with no less awe.

A guest who came more often than any one else to the Hall, and whom Richard disliked, was Mr. Ventrey's sister-in-law and Lettice's aunt, the Dowager Countess of Pontypridd. She was a tall, bony woman with a high-bridged nose, and surveyed the world through a pair of tortoise-shell glasses attached to a sort of tortoise-shell paper knife in a way Richard felt to be offensive. He thought she was not unlike his Aunt

Henrietta Moggeridge, but that lady could have given her many points in vivacity and intelligence, for Lady Pontypridd's contributions to any conversation in which she might take part were not of a lively order, and usually bore upon her own importance in the scheme of things. This seemed to be the only topic which really interested her. Richard thought it rather surprising that Mr. Ventrey should care to have her in the house so much and treat her so courteously as he did when she was there. Although she was always coldly civil to himself, he suspected her of disliking him, and his suspicion was well founded. More than once she had taken the Squire to task for allowing him to be so much in the company of his granddaughter. She did so once as they were sitting in the garden at the back of the house and Richard and Lettice were approaching them, but still some way off, from one of their long journeys of exploration in the forest.

"I cannot think, my dear Harry," said Lady Pontypridd, "why you should allow Lettice to be so constantly with that boy of the Vicar's. Surely he is not a fit companion for her."

"Richard Baldock, Louisa," replied the Squire, "is a gentleman for whom I have the greatest possible regard. For the last year he has been my own most constant companion. I cannot permit you to disparage one of my intimate friends."

"I wish you would kindly be serious for a moment, Harry. I feel deeply upon this subject, and intend to speak about it. I am to introduce Lettice when the time comes, and I have a right to ask that she shall not be brought up to form connections which I should certainly not, in my position, allow her to form when she comes under my charge."

"If you never introduce her to any one with a less attractive character than that of my friend Richard, Louisa, I shall be very well satisfied."

"I dare say the boy's character is good. I don't know anything about it. It seems to me that he presumes, but I dare say that is your fault. It is his social status I object to. It makes him unfitting to be the constant companion of a girl with Lettice's prospects and connections. In the position which I occupy, a position which I have no desire to overrate—I beg your pardon, Harry?—I repeat, a position which I have no desire to overrate, but which is a well-known and well-established one, I do not wish that the girl should come to me hampered by undesirable ties. You would not wish her to *marry* this boy, I suppose, the son of a poor country clergyman of neither birth nor, so far as I can judge, manners?"

"The question of Lettice's marriage is not a very pressing one at present, Louisa. She is not yet nine years old."

"The question of a girl's marriage is always pressing. It may very well be thought of before she leaves the cradle."

"We have not time to discuss the question as fully as you would wish to, Louisa, unless you would care to discuss it in the presence of the parties concerned. It may save trouble if I say at once that I do not want to discuss it at all. Lettice gets nothing but good from her companionship with Richard Baldock, and as long as I am alive they will see as much of each other as he or she or I could desire. If she ever comes to be entirely under your charge you will act as you please. You will oblige me by taking this decision as final."

Lady Pontypridd did so, as far as direct remon-

strance with her brother-in-law was concerned, but her manner did not increase in geniality towards Richard, who escaped contact with her as far as he was able. Lettice confided to him that she did not love her aunt. "Interfering" was the word that occurred most often in her strictures. But, although Lady Pontypridd's visits were frequent, they were never very lengthy, and the disturbing influence she exercised when at the Hall removed itself with her departure.

Throughout the two years of which we are now taking occasional glimpses Richard's home life was serene. It seemed to him, when he thought about it, that his father had altered—was a different man from the one who had lectured and worried him in his childhood. There was certainly a more agreeable accord between them. It was probably chiefly owing to the fact that with growth in years Richard's character was showing increasing self-reliance and independence, and that he was no longer an object upon whom petty interference could safely be exercised.

But John Baldock had changed. Every man changes in character as the years go over his head, and gets either better or worse. With all his drawbacks of temperament and mistaken views, his mind was honestly set upon righteousness as he understood it, and his reward had come with advancing years in a riper knowledge of good and evil. No doubt, confronted with the development of a nature stronger and saner than his own, he had learnt from it, though he might have been surprised to hear that he could learn anything from his son, and the standards by which he had hitherto judged the world were shifting.

After the first few weeks, during which he thought he had found in the Squire a man entirely after his own

heart, the Vicar had gradually withdrawn from his intimacy at the Hall. He was, perhaps, the only man in Beechurst whose opinion of Mr. Ventrey was not of the highest. The Squire puzzled him. He could not close his eyes to his genuine benevolence nor to the intrepidity with which he faced his restricted life; but he failed, although he made earnest endeavours, to trace these good qualities to the source from which he was assured they alone could spring. Mr. Ventrey was not a religious man, as John Baldock understood religion, but he accused him in his mind of having tried to palm himself off as such during the early stages of their acquaintance. He regarded him with watchful suspicion, afterwards almost with aversion, but kept his thoughts to himself, and not until a later date allowed his antagonism to appear.

Richard's relations with John Meaking, to use the language of the King's Speech, continued friendly. He still frequented the shop in Abbey Street during his spare hours in Storbridge, although he now looked upon novels with suspicion and severely restricted himself in their consumption. He was able to do his friend a very good turn, for he induced Mr. Ventrey, who was a large buyer of books, to make his purchases through the medium of Mr. Gannett; and, since the Squire could not go to the shop, Meaking was required to pay him frequent visits with parcels of books for inspection, and thereby gained experience in the wants of customers of the more intelligent order, as well as an agreeable series of outings.

Mr. Gannett's business continued to prosper, and Mr. Gannett's assistant with it. The shop had been enlarged by the inclusion of a small adjoining house, the upper part of which Meaking occupied as part

reward for his labours, and provided a home therein for his mother, which, if it were not as good as her ambition aspired to, was a good deal better than the one she had hitherto occupied. His enterprise was rather remarkable in its results, for Storbridge was a small town and could hardly have been expected to maintain a thriving retail bookseller. But he had concentrated his energies on securing customers from the surrounding neighbourhood, studied their requirements so carefully and maintained such an attractive exhibition of books in the shop itself, that he drove a thriving trade, and Mr. Gannett became known vicariously as one of the most understanding booksellers in the provinces.

Meaking did not long continue to double the parts of salesman and errand boy. He very soon had an assistant as well as a boy under him, and even then found ample scope for his activities.

"Are you satisfied with the way things have turned out now?" Richard asked him one day, about a year after he had come to Storbridge.

"With the way things have turned out here I'm more than satisfied," he replied. "I couldn't have believed that I should have done what I have in the time. But there's a limit, and I've reached it. There's no scope for extending the business farther in a little place like this, though we're exceptionally fortunate in having such a large area to draw on outside. Of course, I shall succeed to the business when Mr. Gannett dies, and I don't suppose he'll last many years longer. But I expect I shall have to make a change, though I'm happy enough where I am."

"Then why on earth make a change?" asked Richard, not unnaturally.

"It's ambition, my boy. It leads you on, and you

can't help yourself. I know I can do big things if I get the opportunity, and there's something urges me to get it and go and do them."

"What about the forest? You threw up opportunities deliberately on purpose to come back to it. Have you got tired of it already?"

"You know quite well I haven't. It's the passion of my life, and I don't care who knows it. But I'm not sure that I've earned it yet. Every man's got to do the work that's in him wherever it leads him. If he don't, he spoils his pleasure. I may have to go away from here, but I should come back after I'd got as far as I could expect to get. I'd never lose sight of the forest. It'd always be in my mind, wherever I was, and I shall hope to spend my last days here."

"When you are too old to enjoy it. I'd rather have it now and make less money."

"It isn't making money. You don't understand these things. You haven't got a career before you like I have."

"I'm going to be a clergyman. That's just as much of a career as being a bookseller."

"It is to some people; it isn't to you. You don't know what a career is. Do you think of what you're going to do when you're a clergyman every hour of the day and night?"

"I generally go to sleep at night; but I can't say I think much about it yet even in the day."

"Of course you don't; and, if you think about it at all, you just think that you'll be able to have rather a good time. You don't think about the work you're going to do. I don't blame you, either. You, as you are, are never going to be a clergyman—at least, I hope you won't. If ever you are, you'll be quite a

different person. Then nothing will be of any importance except your work. You won't care where it takes you. And that's what I feel about mine. I don't even feel as if it was for me to decide. When the time comes for me to go away from here I shall go, and not even the forest will keep me."

"Well, I hope you won't go yet awhile."

"I shan't. I've got that clear, at any rate. I shall stay here as long as Mr. Gannett lives, and, when I've succeeded to his business, then I shall have to think about it and do what I'm led to do. And I should just like to say this to you, Dick Baldock. There will be a place for you in whatever business I've got, so long as it has to do with books, as I expect it will. You may think that you won't want it now, and very likely you won't. But remember that it'll be there waiting for you if you like to take it, and that's what I wouldn't say to anybody else in the world."

Richard thanked him in suitable terms, and took his departure.

One afternoon, about a year later than this, there was a charity entertainment in the Town Hall at Storbidge. The school had an unexpected half-holiday; it was a wet day, and Richard had a few shillings in his pocket. This concurrence of circumstances led him to one of the cheaper seats in the hall, prepared thoroughly to enjoy the varied performance which the committee of the charity aforesaid had provided for its patrons. This included songs, serious and comic, instrumental music, a company of bell-ringers, and a ventriloquist billed in important capital letters as Lieutenant Joy.

When the curtain rose for this item of the entertainment, it revealed the usual ventriloquist's stock-in-trade,

dummy figures of a leering old man and woman and two most unpleasant-featured children sitting on a row of chairs facing the audience. This amiable party was immediately joined by a clean-shaven gentleman in a full-dress naval uniform, in whom to his intense surprise, Richard recognized his old friend and adviser, Mr. Bliss, his aunt's butler.

The performance was an excellent one. Mr. Bliss, or Lieutenant Joy, had the most complete control over his facial muscles, and his ventriloquial voice was wonderfully natural, whether it was applied to the shrewish remarks of the old woman, the querulous replies of the old man, or the surprising impertinences of the two disagreeable children. Richard had never heard a ventriloquist before, and was lost in admiration of the feats performed by his one-time friend. He was also very anxious to speak to him, and when his turn, vociferously applauded, was over, sacrificed the rest of the entertainment, which by now was nearly ended, and went round to the back of the hall to wait till Lieutenant Joy should come out.

It was Mr. Bliss who came out a quarter of an hour later, and who recognized Richard instantly, and shook him very warmly by the hand.

"I saw you," he said. "I looked out for you, knowing you lived in these parts, but hardly expected to be so fortunate. There's nobody I'd rather have met. Now step into this fly—they'll bring out my boxes directly—and drive with me up to the station. We shall have time for a cup of tea there before my train goes. I've got to get on to Brigmouth—performing there to-night—winter gardens—most fashionable audience. Well, upon me word, I'm pleased to see you, and looking so well, and grown, too. Who'd have thought—now,

steady with those boxes—that's right, here's twopence for you. Step in, Mr. Baldock—station, cabby, down platform."

Mr. Bliss was the bustling man of tricks, kindness, and harmless self-importance whom Richard remembered. Already it was difficult to recall the other side of him, which he also remembered, or to bend imagination to being called "sir" by him.

"Well, you see, Mr. Baldock," he said, when they were seated side by side in the fly and driving towards the station, "I've cut the painter. No more positions of responsibility in other people's households, though I took the small precaution of slightly changing my name, in case a public life should prove a failure, and I might have to go back to it. No chance of that now, though. I'm full up of engagements, and climbing to the top of the tree. Now, tell me honestly, have you ever seen a ventriloquy artist to beat me?"

"I've never seen one at all before," replied Richard, "but I can't imagine a better. I think it's wonderful. But what about the juggling? This is quite a new line, isn't it?"

"It is," replied Mr. Bliss. "It's a funny thing. I spent many years of hard work preparing for the juggling profession, and started in that line when I threw up my appointment with her ladyship—your aunt, you know. But I don't mind acknowledging to you now, though I wouldn't have done a year ago, that I should never have risen far in it. It's overstocked for one thing; and I don't think I've got the originality to invent new exhibitions. You can't do much without that. I wasn't getting good engagements; and, in fact, I was spending money I'd saved, instead of earning more. Of course, being used to a good table all my

life, I live a bit higher than most artists. I'm looked up to, I assure you, in the profession; and it would surprise most of them to know that I'd ever been in what's called service, let alone what I told you of my early days. I know the secret's safe with you, and you won't let on. Of course, all ventriloquists are lieutenants, but they think I'm a real retired naval officer. I don't undeceive 'em, though I don't tell lies about it. It's good for business.

"Well, I'll tell you how it was. I was a bit down in my luck once—not poor, you know, I'd got plenty of money put by, but beginning to think I wasn't going to get on. I was in a show with a ventriloquist, and, without thinking much about it, just careless like, I tried to imitate him. You'd hardly believe it, but, with next to no practice at all, I found I was what you might call a ventriloquist born. It came as easy to me as talking natural. Within a month—actually as short a time as that—I'd thrown over the juggling and was booking engagements for a new and refined ventriloquy turn. And I never look back from that moment. Now that's what I call a remarkable thing. Years and years of labour and application wasted, and complete success at once in a line I'd never so much as thought of. Don't you think, in your experience, it's remarkable?"

"Yes," said Richard, "it rather goes against work with an object."

Mr. Bliss eyed him askance. "You haven't forgotten that, then," he said.

"No, I thought it was very good advice."

"And so it is. You stick to it, Mr. Richard. Don't be led away by what's happened to me. Mine's natural gift, discovered by chance. That alters things. And

you don't suppose that even that's turned into a career without work, do you?"

"I suppose not. Do you have to practise much?"

"Not for the voice. That comes natural, as I told you. But fresh gag's got to be invented. It doesn't do to stand still. Now, didn't you think that the dialogue was crisp and mirth-provoking?"

"I thought it was jolly funny," replied Richard. "Did you make it up yourself?"

"Well, don't tell any one else, but—no, I haven't got the invention for it. That's my weak point. I employ a literary man to do it for me. An Oxford scholar he is, and if I wanted a dialogue in Greek or Hebrew, he'd do it for me just as easy as English."

"You're rather lucky to find a man like that."

"Ye—es. And he's lucky too. I treat him liberally. He—well, I don't mind telling you—he drinks. I first met him in a bar. In fact, he's pretty far gone. But the stuff that man knocks out!—when he's sober. It would make the fortune of *Punch*. I've sometimes laid on my bed and ached with laughter over it. Some of it I can't use in mixed assemblies—though for smoking concerts it's—well, it's unique. I keep him at it. I've got pages and pages of jokes locked away at home—all paid for. If I can keep him going for another year I shall have enough to last me my lifetime. Ah, here we are at the station. Now, I'll just run and get a ticket, and then we'll go and have a cup of tea and talk a bit more. We've got nearly half an hour."

"I've told you enough about myself," said Mr. Bliss, when they were seated opposite one another at a marble-topped table in the station refreshment room. "My foot's well up the ladder, and I shall be performing in royal palaces before I'm dead. It's a fine life, Mr.

Richard—none like it. I assure you I consider myself a fortunate and happy man. I—this tea isn't fit for the pig-tub. Hi! waitress!"

But for this fortunate interruption Mr. Bliss would probably have gone on talking about himself without interruption until his train left the station. But during the short altercation which ensued Richard decided that Mr. Bliss had talked enough about himself, and when he was again available for conversation asked him when he had left Paradine Park.

"We didn't go there much after the marriage," said Mr. Bliss. "We resided mostly at Bursgath Hall—Sir Franklin's place in Yorkshire. There were great doings there. You never saw a fine place so tumble-down, not unless it was quite a ruin. It took us the best part of a year just to get the house set right. Her ladyship she enjoyed that thoroughly. Speaking as a professional man I can now say what I couldn't have said when we met last, and I was in a confidential position with regard to her. The fact is in her character she must have something going on to occupy her thoughts—something big. She can't just settle down and lead an ordinary life; though, poor thing, if all I hear's true, she'll be having to draw her horns in a bit now."

"Why, what has happened?"

"What any one with eyes in his head would have expected to happen. Sir Franklin, he's a very pleasant gentleman to live with. Never an ill word from him, and up to a certain point considerate for others, and specially for those in a subordinate position. Well liked he was in the household—a good deal better than young Mr. Syde, who was arrogant and domineering to the servants—though not to me; I wouldn't have put

up with it. Well, as I was going to say, her ladyship, she's rich—very rich. I should be afraid to say how rich, but in an ordinary way money's no object with her at all. Thousands and thousands must have gone on restoring Bursgath Hall, and on the gardens and stables, and after that on the estate. Oh, thousands and thousands—enough to make you or me rich for life. Then there was a house in town bought and furnished from top to bottom, regardless. A fine house—Grosvenor Square, no less. Money must have been poured out like water that first year, and I've not the slightest doubt there were debts of Sir Franklin's to settle too, and for a pretty penny. Well, she didn't turn a hair over it. In fact she was as busy and as pleased as could be all the time. And he behaved well to her, too. Until he's crossed in his own pleasures there's no more polite and thoughtful gentleman than Major-General Sir Franklin Syde, K.C.B."

"And Laurence?"

"Mr. Laurence Syde isn't old enough to sink his own feelings so much as his distinguished father, but he's learning it fast. She took to him wonderfully. Well, *you* saw that when you were at Paradine Park, and it didn't go off as you might have expected, for I won't hide from you that her ladyship is very changeable in her likes and dislikes. She must be amused, you see, and kept occupied with something fresh. However, as I say, Mr. Syde, he knows how to please her, and he did please her. Not very difficult, as he was only at home in his holidays, and had everything he wanted almost before he could ask for it. He's in clover, that young gentleman, and he's sensible enough to know it and see that he keeps there."

"Then what is wrong with them?"

“Well, it’s the racing. I think she was frightened of it from the first, because Sir Franklin, he’s got through two fortunes over it already, and, after all, it’s the stupidest way of getting rid of money that you could hit on. The second year, when the best part of the work had been done in getting the houses as they wanted them, there was a yacht bought. Her ladyship didn’t care for it much, and of course a yacht’s a big expense. I happened to be in the room when it was settled they were to have it. She was too careless to hide what she had to say when I was there, or the other servants either for that matter. ‘Well, we’ve spent an enormous lot of money, Franklin,’ she says, ‘during the last year, and we really ought to wait for the yacht. But if you want it we will have it. I don’t care much about it myself; but, as long as it isn’t the stud again, I don’t mind what I spend to make you happy.’ She was devoted to him, you know; treated him like a child who always wanted new toys. And that’s just what he was, and only the most expensive toys that would suit him. So they bought the yacht and we went to Cowes that summer, and then for a cruise up the West Coast, and that kept us quiet for that year. Next year there was a moor in Scotland to keep him quiet, and, of course, all the other expenses going on just the same. However, she was so rich that I really don’t think all that mattered, and of course she must have saved a lot since Mr. Moggeridge died. At the end of that year I left, and struck out for myself, but things seemed to me then to be getting a little strained between them; and I know the racehorses had been mentioned more than once, for Sir Franklin was set on that form of folly, and I heard him arguing with her that it was the best way of making money, if it was done as he meant to do it.”

"He does keep racehorses, doesn't he? I've seen his name in the paper."

"Yes, she gave way. I don't hear much of them now, because in my position I can't very well correspond with those in domestic service; but I did see Hart, the coachman, last year, and he said the talk was that he began to get nasty to her; and as she couldn't stand that, being fond of him, she gave in. Sir Franklin got his stud, and we'll hope he's pleased with it. He's never won a big race yet, and I don't believe he ever will. He's one of the unlucky ones. But it's a patent sink for money, and Hart told me that he was running through hers at a gallop. The yacht and the moor's been put down, and that's a sign that it's telling. I don't know what'll go next; but if he don't ruin her before he's done, he'll make a great deal of difference in her income and way of living. I think it's a crool shame, myself. That money ought to have come to you, and would a' done if he hadn't intrigued himself into her good graces. And young Mr. Syde was just as bad. He was worse, 'cos, being young, he oughtn't to have been thinking about such things. He behaved with black treachery towards you that time you were staying with us, and I've never forgiven him for it; and if I could put a spoke in their wheels I'd do it now to see things put right again. However, I'm afraid it's too late to think of that now."

"You needn't think of it on my behalf," said Richard. "I don't want to look forward to other people's death that I may become rich, and I should never have been able to please Aunt Henrietta; I see that quite plainly now. She wants flattery. Even if Sir Franklin and Laurence hadn't disliked me and tried to get me out of the place, as I believe they did, I should have gone

pretty soon. My aunt would have sent me packing sooner or later. I don't feel a bit sore now about what happened then; in fact, I never think of it."

"Spoken like a man, and as I thought you'd speak. No, you don't want to be hanging on the whims of a rich woman; you're made of too good stuff. You can leave that sort of thing to people whose only idea in the world is to amuse themselves and spend money. I name no names. You're much better off striking out a line for yourself and making your own way in the world. Now, tell me what you're doing. I've always taken an interest in your career, Mr. Richard, and always shall. Begin at the beginning. Now—— Bless me; there's my train! Here, Miss, take the money quick—one and four, and there's twopence for yourself. Hi! porter, you be careful of those boxes. Where's a second smoking? Well, *good-bye*, Mr. Richard. It's done me good to see you again and hear you talk. And if ever I can do anything to——"

The rest of Mr. Bliss's words were lost in the rumble of the retreating train, but he continued to wave his hat with hearty good will until his carriage disappeared round a curve.

CHAPTER XXI

RICHARD MAKES A DECISION

ON Richard's eighteenth birthday his father called him into his study. "I wish to talk to you about the future," he said. "It is time we came to a definite decision."

Richard sat down and waited for what was to come next.

"Is there anything in your mind that you would wish to say to me about it?" asked the Vicar.

"I don't think so, father," said Richard; "at least I would rather hear what you thought of for me, first."

"Well, you know quite well what I have thought of for you. It is my dearest wish that you should preach the Gospel. I have hoped that it might become your wish too, but I have not pressed you on the matter. I have left it in God's hands. What I have done is to see that your education was conducted on such lines as to lead up to your taking orders in the Church. But we now have to make a definite decision, and it is for you to make it, because I should be the last man in the world to ask you to take up such a life-work as I have put before you if your own heart was not in it."

Richard thought for a moment. "Why have I got to make the decision now, father?" he asked.

"Because if you are to go to the University, it is time to make preparations."

Richard flushed a little. "I have been thinking about that lately, father," he said. "I had an idea that you

would make my going to Oxford depend upon whether I went into the Church afterwards, and I decided to ask you when you talked to me about it not to make it dependent on that. I suppose the University is a good preparation for other professions besides the Church."

"I dare say it is; but I should not feel justified in spending the money on your going there unless it were to prepare you for work in the ministry. I will tell you how the matter stands, Richard. You are old enough now to enter into my motives, and to think for yourself. You could not, of course, go to Oxford in any case unless you gained both the school exhibition and a college scholarship or exhibition as well. The first I think you are safe for, and the second you ought to get. If it were a major scholarship we might manage it in any case, but I am quite convinced that you are not quite up to that mark. You could not expect more than an exhibition, and that would leave another seventy pounds a year to be provided for three or four years. I have about sixty or seventy pounds put by for you which your aunt sent you from time to time during your childhood, and the rest I should have to provide. My income is a very small one, and, when I have set aside a tithe of it for God's service, it is only by constant watchfulness that I am able to meet necessary expenses. I do not shrink from self-sacrifice on your behalf, and something I could contribute by economizing severely. But the bulk of my contribution would have to come out of the money I set aside, as I tell you, for the direct service of God. I should consider this money properly spent in fitting you for that service, but not in fitting you merely for a secular profession. That is how the matter stands, and why you must make up your mind now to consecrate your life to

the ministry or take up some other employment which does not demand a University education."

Richard sat silent, in considerable dejection.

"Of course," pursued his father, "it is a serious matter for any one of your age to decide on, and I do not expect you to decide it entirely on your own responsibility. I have had your future in my mind for so long, having thought earnestly and prayed earnestly about it, and I am convinced that I have done right, and that it is God's wish that you should undertake the work of the ministry. I dedicated you to Him at your birth, and I believe He has accepted my gift. I think I have gained assurance that this is so. You have never had the startling experiences of conversion which come to some, but God works in many ways, by the still small voice as well as the storm and the earthquake, and when you were confirmed I was comforted to believe that the beneficent work of grace was going on in your heart and that you were being perfected as an instrument. I have not attempted to interfere. I have held back very often when my impulse was to advise and exhort. I have left the matter in His hands, and I believe that I have done right; but, oh my boy, I have yearned over your soul and longed so earnestly to see the stirring of the waters, the saving breath of the Divine Spirit."

He spoke with emotion. Richard was touched by his words and his tone, but he was also troubled in his mind. It seemed to him that in the decision that was to be made emotion ought to have as little place as possible. And, again, the upheavals and crises of spiritual experience which were to his father so all-important, were unreal to him, outside anything he had ever known or seen. He felt as if he were being asked to produce signs of inward struggles which his mind was quite in-

capable of ever undergoing. It had never occurred to him to question the truth of the beliefs in which he had been brought up, but, as far as their miraculous application to human life was concerned, he was a sceptic without knowing it. He could make no reply to his father's half appealing words, but sat silent, feeling uncomfortable. John Baldock mastered his emotion and proceeded.

"What you have to do now, Richard," he said, "is to set your mind wholly on the course that you have to run. Put away childish things. Your whole life must be consecrated to the work that lies before you. The years of preparation that——"

"Then you have decided for me, father?" interrupted Richard, in some not unnatural surprise.

"Do you doubt my wisdom in deciding such a question?" returned his father.

"I thought you said that it was for me to decide."

"So, of course, it is, in the sense that, if you felt for any good reason that you were unable to devote yourself whole-heartedly to the work that lies before you, I should consider it very wrong to force you into it or to press you in any way. But I cannot believe that at your age you can feel any strong disinclination that would cause you to run counter to my wishes. I——"

"But, father, surely, if you think me too young to decide against it, I am too young to decide in favour of it? If I say yes now, I bind myself for my whole life. You mean that, don't you? Unless I say definitely now that I do not wish to be a clergyman when I am old enough, I shall go to Oxford in another year, and after that it won't be open to me to say that I have thought it over and I do not think that I am suited for it."

John Baldock's face had been growing darker during this speech. "You certainly would be going to Oxford under false pretences if you drew back later," he said. "I have explained that to you."

"Then I am to consider myself bound in honour for my whole life to what I decide now on my eighteenth birthday."

"You speak in a strange way. Is there anything in your life that leads you to draw back from the holy calling you are privileged to be able to follow?"

"I have not thought very much about it. When I have done so, I haven't disliked the idea. But I don't think I ever intended to undertake it without thinking it over very seriously."

"That, of course, you must do. You must make up your mind that no worldly thoughts or ambitions shall influence you; you must make a most strenuous effort of mind—knowing well that you will be helped to do so—to keep straight in the narrow path. It will seem a very narrow one at first, no doubt, but you will be abundantly blessed and happy when you come to tread it. I wish you to think seriously of it—most seriously and prayerfully, but I do not wish you to draw back from it at the very entrance of your manhood."

Richard felt a strong impulse of irritation. "You seem to want me, father, to consider a question quite settled, which at the same time you tell me I have to decide upon for myself," he said. "What do you really mean that I am to decide for myself?"

"You have to decide that you will allow nothing to turn you aside from the path laid down for you."

"Then it is not open to me to decide whether I take that path or not? That is already settled for me?"

"I have never thought of it otherwise. I confess I should be very grievously disappointed if you refuse to follow out the course I have had in my mind for you for years; which I am assured is the one that has been chosen for you, and, as you yourself have known, has been before you ever since you went to school."

"I am very sorry, father," said Richard, after a short pause. "I hope you won't be angry with what I say, or misunderstand it; but I must decide a question of that sort for myself. I thought you said as much just now, but I suppose I was mistaken. I can't possibly give a promise now that will bind me for my whole life to do something that I may think quite differently about in five years' time."

"I am immensely disappointed in you, Richard. Can you deny that the life of a clergyman is, of all others, the one spent most directly in doing God's service?"

"I—I suppose it is so!"

"And are you not pledged by your baptismal and confirmation vows to spend yourself and your life in God's service?"

"Yes," hesitatingly.

"Then, why this refusal to take up the highest work of all?"

"I am not sure that it is the highest work of all, for everybody. In fact it is quite certain that it can't be, or everybody who professes Christianity would be bound to take it up."

"I must beg of you not to speak flippantly. This is perhaps the most serious moment of your life, for you have to make a choice of good or evil in it. Nobody would say that every Christian is called to a particular work. The question you have to face is whether *you* are not called to it."

"That is the question I am trying to face, father. If I felt that I were called to it, I—— Well, I don't know how that call would come, but I—I hope I shouldn't refuse it."

"A call may come in many ways. It came to St. Paul by a compelling miracle; it comes to us in these days very often through the juncture of circumstance. In your case it seems clear to me that the way is pointed out, and that you may interpret the circumstances of your life as a call to the ministry."

"What circumstances, father? I am the son of a clergyman. That is the only possible circumstance I can see that directs me towards the Church."

"That is one circumstance—one of the least. There are many others. The expectations which I had for the first twelve years of your life of worldly position and wealth were disappointed, as you know. I look upon that as a very strong guiding circumstance. The fact that it is only possible for me to send you to the University—which is the only entrance I know of to such callings as you might otherwise be suited for—if it is to be a preparation for this one holy calling, is another. But the greatest of all is the inward conviction which has been given to me that I am right in dedicating you to this service."

"But, father, you may be mistaken in that conviction."

"I am not mistaken."

"I don't feel it myself. Surely I ought to feel it strongly myself if—if it is sent from God."

"I pray that you may feel it. I believe that you will if you do not resist the Divine call."

"Then I must wait until I do. I can't run the risk. I cannot bind myself now."

"I don't sympathize with you in your hesitation, Richard. It seems to me to come from lack of faith, and if you yield yourself to God's guidance the faith will come at once. But I will not hurry matters. I will put aside my own disappointment, and wait until God's will is revealed to you. I think that in that, at any rate, you are right. Only I am convinced most firmly of this, that the assurance will come the moment you yield yourself. Cannot you make up your mind now to ask for grace sufficient to enable you to do so?"

"I will think over it, father."

"Not resting on your own powers, still less, I trust, on the advice of others who are ill fitted to help you in a matter of this sort. Will you pray over it?"

"Yes."

"Then I am content to leave it there. I believe you are honest, Richard. You have been taught what prayer means and what it can do. If you exercise yourself in prayer the answer will come sooner or later. I am so sure of what the answer will be that I am willing to let you go on now with your preparations for the University, and even to send you there if the light has not come to you by the time you will have to go up. I shall wait in full confidence until you come and tell me that you have made up your mind—that the call has come. I will trust you. I know well what the result will be."

With this strange compact Richard departed. He went out through the garden into the heart of the forest to where a great beech spread branching arms over a deep-chasmed brook, and threw himself down under its shade. He stayed there for hours, and fought his battle. He did not deceive himself. He knew very well that he had to come to a decision, and he told him-

self that he would make it in that place and abide by it afterwards.

He went over in his mind the conversation he had had with his father. The contradictions which had been so patent in his father's attitude towards the question presented no great difficulties to him. He resolved them by what he knew of his character and habits of thought. First of all he had been told that he must make the decision for himself, and at once. Of course such a decision lay with him who alone was concerned in it, as any sensible being must perceive; and his father had a strong vein of common sense, however much he might be turned aside from relying on it by other considerations. And, allowing for his views, he was not altogether unreasonable in stipulating that the decision must be come to at this early date under the circumstances he had mentioned. Then had come the startling disclosure that, after all, the decision was considered to have been already arrived at, Richard himself having had no say in the matter. This was John Baldock in his domineering mood, impatient of any opinions opposed to his own, hardly admitting that such opinions had a right to exist. Richard had suffered enough under this quality of his father's character in the past, but very little of late; and in the generosity of his youth he passed it over without resentment, recognizing, in an impulse of affection, that it had lasted during their interview but a short time before giving way to an attitude quite different. It could be left out of account for the present, but if it appeared again there could be no doubt but that it must be resisted.

And then had come the disclosure by which he realized that his determination must be influenced. His father, convinced that the decision had already been made by a

Power whom both of them must eventually obey, had been willing, after all that had gone before, to insist neither on an undertaking from Richard nor on his own right to decide for him, but to leave the decision indefinitely open. Richard might stay at school another year, and then go to Oxford, without binding himself to anything that might come later. He might, in fact, do just what he wished to do, and put off all question of the future for another four or five years.

Very well, then, why not? There was no step to take of any sort. He had simply to go on with his life on the lines on which he had thought an hour before it would proceed for years to come. What had happened to make him feel that he could not do so without clearing the obstacle of a grave decision?

It was a great temptation. He longed as ardently now to go to Oxford as years before he had longed to go to Rugby. More ardently, because with greater understanding. But he realized that it was a temptation, although at first he could not tell why. He set his mind to the task of discovering the reason. He would be honest; he would face it out.

Why did he shrink from taking advantage of his father's surrender? Because he felt that if he did so he would be going to Oxford under false pretences. If his father had had any doubt of his finally taking orders he would certainly not have consented to his going. This much was clear. If he felt that he could not take that course, then it would not be right that he should go. But did he feel this? That was what he had to decide.

He had never felt it hitherto. He had had the career of a clergyman before him for the last five years, and had accepted it as his settled future. If any one had asked him during that time what he was

going to do after his education should be over, he had answered without hesitation that he was going into the Church. He had said so to John Meaking, and to Mr. Ventrey.

His thoughts, in parentheses, turned to these, his two most intimate friends. He thought for a time that he would like to ask their advice on the problem that he was going to solve, but soon relinquished the idea. No one but himself could make up his mind for him. Besides, he knew well what each of them would say. Mr. Ventrey had never spoken to him directly upon the subject, but he knew as well as if he had done so that he would be unsympathetic towards a calling which his father judged to be the highest he could follow. His father knew it too, and had hinted as much. He allowed himself for a moment to compare the lives of the two men, the one who claimed divine authority for all his actions, the other who grasped his opportunities in his own hands and made what he could of them. Which of the two was likely to be the better guide in the difficulties of life and conduct? He turned away from the question, leaving it unanswered. But the knowledge of what Mr. Ventrey would have advised him to do, if he had asked his advice and he had been able to give it frankly, weighed with him.

John Meaking had given his advice on the subject more than once, quite straightforwardly, and without being asked for it. Richard had not paid much attention to it at the time, but it recurred to him now. He felt it to be good advice as far as it went. Meaking held strongly that the work you set your hand to ought to be the chief thing in your life, and that you could not be happy in it unless it were. He also held that, unless a complete change came over Richard's char-

acter, it was impossible that he should be able to make his work as a clergyman the chief thing in his life. Richard had been more influenced by Meaking's views on the subject, expressed in various ways, but always with cogency, than he had known. Possibly it was owing to these, rather than to the more conventional conceptions held by his father of what a clergyman's life should be, that he shrank from pledging himself to a vocation for which he doubted whether he was fitted.

At this stage he became very unhappy, for he saw whither his cogitations were leading him. From their widely different points of view, both his father and Meaking held the highest ideals as to what the life of a teacher of religion should be. It must be nothing less than entirely devoted to the one aim and object. Mr. Ventrey would no doubt hold much the same view, for there was a curious similarity between the workings of his mind and those of Meaking's; curious, considering that the one was a young man of very small education, and the other had spent a long life in training his mind and his understanding. And Richard was bound to acknowledge that this view had become his. It would no longer be possible for him to look forward to the life of a country clergyman as affording him opportunities for the occupations and pleasures he liked best. He must go into it putting them aside altogether as of no account, or not at all. And when he had brought himself to this point it became quite plain that, as he was at present constituted, there was nothing whatever that drew him towards it. Unless he became quite a new creature within the next few years, a creature with different tastes and impulses and powers of mind, he would be as unfitted for a cure of souls as any one

could be who estimated aright the importance of that calling.

He came to this conclusion by the direct path indicated, but it was long before he could fix it in his mind. His boyish self, impatient of dogmatic scruples, rose up and told him to look around him. How many of the clergymen he knew took these high views of their calling? Were not their lives much the same as those of other men? Did not even the best of them indulge in much the same pleasures, and were they any the worse for it? There was no question of his shirking his duty as a clergyman. He would do it as well as he could, and take an interest in it too. He would preach and visit and hold the requisite services and meetings, and when he had done his duty, what harm in taking part in the most innocent recreation, out of doors or in, that a man could enjoy? These arguments, and others of the same sort, appeared consoling and convincing until he began to be persuaded by them; when they were met by the simple conviction that, whatever might be right for other men, he, Richard Baldock, having had his eyes open to the truth of things, could not choose this calling unless he were prepared to give up everything in life that he took most pleasure in. Again the house of cards was built up, and again demolished. At last he accepted the decision to which he had been brought. He was bound in honour to reject his father's offer, unless he saw in front of him a possibility of a complete change in himself.

He could not see this possibility. Nothing that he really believed or had observed in the lives of others pointed to it. He saw himself growing into his manhood with the tastes that he had already begun to form strengthened, and others added to them. But nothing

that he knew of himself indicated that impulses quite dissimilar would be born in him, which might alter his desires altogether.

His father did believe this—not only that it might happen, but that it would happen. He believed it so perfectly that he was willing to take the risk of sending him to Oxford, although he would not think of sending him there to prepare for any profession or calling but that of the church. Then why could he not relieve himself of the responsibility of decision, and take what was offered to him?

Here was a temptation more subtle than the last. He believed the truths that his father taught, did he not? He had never thought of questioning them. The instantaneous, miraculous conversion—he had been told of many examples of this—did he deny that they had occurred? No. But he had never seen an instance. On the contrary, he had met with several instances of people who professed to have undergone this miraculous change of heart in the past, but whose thoughts and actions seemed to be guided by just such motives as those of people who made no professions. Still, his life had been spent in rather a restricted circle; he did not deny, did he, that there were thousands of people in the world who had experienced a real change of heart? Why, it was the doctrine upon which Christianity was founded. His father had preached nothing else. No, he did not deny it.

Then was it not probable that his father was right? He claimed nothing less than a divine revelation that his own dedication of his son to this particular service of God had been accepted, and that the “call” without which no man might take upon himself the responsibilities of the ministry, would surely come to him in

good time. Why could he not leave it there? He had nothing to do—even his father would have told him that he had nothing to do—but to wait without impatience until the call and the change should come to him. Could he undertake not to resist it if it came? Yes, this, at any rate, he could undertake.

Then followed a long struggle of mind. Again reason, founded on beliefs assented to, seemed to have the victory, and more than once Richard believed himself to have come to the conclusion that it would be right for him to do what he ardently wished to do, to go to Oxford and to leave the greater question for the future. But it was not a conclusion that could satisfy him. He could not rise from his place and go home with a clear and contented mind, having so decided. The question would arise again and again, and he knew that he would never be able to free himself from the charge which his own honesty would bring against him, that he had so decided because he wanted to go to Oxford, and not because he thought that there would be any chance of his ever wanting now to go into the Church.

He seemed to have come to a deadlock. He could not find a flaw in the arguments he had produced in favour of accepting his father's offer, but his own honest self still resisted them. He remembered his promise to use the weapon of prayer in his deliberations. He knelt down where he was, away from men, alone with the God whom he believed in with all sincerity, in spite of a dawning scepticism as to the dogmas in which he had been trained, and put up his petition. It was a prayer for guidance, and it seemed to him that it was instantly answered. The arguments by which he had sought to persuade himself were merely plausible. There was no necessity to refute them. They could be

ignored. It was not for him to take upon himself, either now or at any time, the functions of a priesthood; and, that being so, it was not open to him to take advantage of an expectation held by his father but not by himself, and proceed with his education as it was at present mapped out for him.

Now, at last, he felt strong and settled in his mind. He had gone through an ordeal, and emerged from it victorious. The contentment that his decision brought him overpowered even the great disappointment occasioned by the downfall of his hopes of Oxford. But that consideration must wait. He could only now feel the relief and buoyancy that arose from a decision honestly come by. He had made himself captain of his soul, and could look the whole world in the face with nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of.

CHAPTER XXII

HOW THE DECISION WAS RECEIVED

RICHARD allowed a few days to elapse before he told his father of the decision to which he had come. He wanted to test his resolution. It remained unchanged, but the exultation he had experienced when it was first made had faded away and left behind it a troubled sense of loss. His thoughts had so often of late turned towards the life of the University, which he was to have entered upon in a little over a year, and had dwelt upon it with such pleasurable anticipations, that he suffered a definite pang of unhappiness many times a day when they followed their wonted course, only to end in a reminder of what had been cut out of his future. It was no ordinary sacrifice he had made on the altar of honesty. It was a giving up of something that he most ardently desired, the loss of which, besides, altered for the present his whole outlook in life. It must be admitted that, although his main intention remained quite firm, he was not without fleeting hopes that Oxford might still come into his future. It was very difficult to give up all idea of it. But he never got so far as to consider how it was to come, for he knew his father well enough to be quite sure that he would abide by his word, and that it was of no use to plead or reason with him. He had a sort of hope in the back of his mind during these two or three days that Mr. Ventrey might help him in some way, at any rate with advice as to what he was to do next; but Mr. Ventrey and Lettice were in Paris, and he had no one to turn to.

His discomfort became no less acute when three days had gone by since his decision had been come to, and he resolved to make it known to his father without any further delay. He went into the study with a spirit very much subdued. He felt it to be rather hard that he should have to go through the scene which he knew could not be avoided, when his resolution had cost him so much. But it was of no use to shirk the inevitable, and he presented himself, prepared to make the best of it.

"I want to speak to you, father, about what we talked over the other day," he said.

The Vicar looked up with a face that was almost eager. "Yes, my boy," he said, "you have been thinking over it, I know. I have observed that you have been serious and collected in your mind, and I feel sure that you have been approaching the matter in a right spirit and that you have received guidance. It could not fail you. I have prayed for you constantly, and I have been assured of that."

This speech did not tend to raise Richard's spirits. "I think I have been guided," he said. "But I am afraid it is not in the direction you wish, father. I have thought it all over very carefully, and I have made up my mind that it would not be right to accept your offer."

John Baldock's face had lost all its eagerness. It had become black, with the intolerant expression that Richard knew so well.

"And pray, why not?" he asked shortly.

"Because you are willing to send me to Oxford only because you are convinced that I shall decide to go into the Church at some time, and——"

"Do not use that expression. You are already in

the Church, as are all baptized Christians. You are going to Oxford to prepare for Holy Orders."

"I can't see any likelihood of my ever wanting to take Orders. In fact, I am sure that I never shall."

"Really, Richard, you would try the patience of Job. How can you at your age be sure of any such thing?"

"I don't know, father. But I am sure."

An exclamation of angry impatience. "You cannot be sure. It is mere obstinacy. It is worse than that. It is a definite resistance of grace. You may feel that as you are at present such a course would be impossible, as no doubt it would be. You may feel very far from being in the spiritual state that would justify you in taking on yourself the responsibilities of the ministry, even if you were old enough and had gone through the requisite training. But I have told you that if you resign yourself to God's wish the grace and the conviction will come in His good time. Why do you take upon yourself to doubt it, or to cut yourself off from the power to accept it when it does come?"

"Because my conviction is as strong as yours, father, that it is not the work for me. I am old enough to think for myself now, and—and to see what I'm fitted for."

"Perhaps you will kindly tell me, then, what you are fitted for."

"I—I don't exactly know, but I——"

"Quite so. A moment ago you said you did."

"I know that I am not fitted for the life of a clergyman—at least, not such a life as I think clergymen ought to lead."

"Oh, you have thought it over as clearly as that,

have you? Will you tell me what your opinion is of the life a clergyman ought to lead?"

"I think that he ought to think about nothing but his work. I mean that I don't think it ought to matter to him where he lives, or how he lives, or what he does—I mean that he ought not to have any likes or dislikes outside his work."

"You put it in a curious way, but you are quite right. That is what the life of a minister of the Gospel should be, but for any man to think that he had the power to lead such a life of himself would be gross presumption. Of course you are not fitted for it, and never could be, in your own strength. But that has nothing whatever to do with the case. It is God's help that is needed to fit you or any one else for the life, and, thanks be to His mercy, it is help so strong that it can break down all selfish desires and impulses, and change the very innermost impulses of a man's heart. And not only that, but it is help that can be had for the asking. Do you doubt all this?"

The dark look had lifted somewhat, and given place to one of earnestness. Richard felt the change, but it brought no relief to his mind. It was harder to stand against than the irritation that had preceded it. He foresaw the weary round repeating itself, all the arguments brought forward again which he himself had used and had not been able to refute except by the inward conviction that there was something wrong with them somewhere, and that if they were accepted he should be led into doing something which he ought not to do. He was tempted to say that he did doubt, and to cut the knot. But that would not be honest either.

"I suppose it must be as you say, father," he replied,

"but I cannot feel that it will be like that with me, and I have tried hard enough."

"In what way have you tried? You seem to me only to be holding back with all your strength against the divine influence that would change your whole life."

"I am sure I am not."

"I cannot talk with you any further about it, Richard. You are in a hard and unrepentant mood. I can only go on praying, in the full assurance that my prayers will some day be answered."

There was silence for a short time. Then John Baldock said: "I have nothing more to say to you now. You had better leave me."

"But what am I to do, father? You said the question must be settled now."

"I consider it as settled. Your present attitude occasions me great sorrow, but I should be unfaithful if I did not still believe that it will be changed. I act on that belief. You are to go on as before, and you will go to Oxford in due course."

Was this really faith or mere fanaticism? Which ever it was, it was a conviction of the utmost strength, and Richard was shaken by it. After all, it might be that he was wrong and his father right, and that if he did not cut himself off from the opportunity there actually would come a time when the whole trend of his nature would alter, when the tastes and habits he was forming would be swept away by a miracle, and others of which he now saw no signs in himself would spring up fully formed to take their place. His reason rejected the possibility as soon as it suggested itself. It was not thus that spiritual changes were worked.

"You know, father," he said, "it is very hard for me. There is nothing at present I want more than to

go to Oxford next year. I only want to tell you that if I do go I cannot pledge myself in any way."

"You are not asked now to pledge yourself."

"But I am bound to say this, too. I am almost as certain as I can be about anything that I shall never take Orders."

John Baldock thought for a moment. "I don't wish to be impatient with you, as I am strongly tempted to be. Let us look the situation in the face. What has occurred to make you take this attitude? You say you have a conviction. I think—I am sure—it is a mistaken one. But I will grant that you hold it honestly. Whence has it come? You have known now for some years what I have had in view for you, and you have not resisted it. I don't think I am mistaken in thinking that you had accepted it. Am I right?"

"Yes, I did accept it until I was made to face it definitely one way or the other. Then it seemed to me quite plain that it was a far more serious thing to undertake than I had thought before. And I can't see any possibility of my ever thinking it right for me to undertake it."

"We seem to be going round in a circle. You deny the possibility of a spiritual change in yourself. That is what it comes to."

"I don't think so, father. I know my conscience doesn't tell me so. But I think that everybody ought to try to do the work that he is best fitted for, and that he can only be quite happy in the world if he does so."

"I recognize the source of that sentiment, Richard, and I deplore that you have given yourself over to guidance which I cannot recognize as coming from the right source. But you are too old now for me to dictate to you as to the friends and companions with

whom you are to associate. The responsibility rests with yourself. Only let me tell you this, that there will come a time when you will deeply regret having turned aside from the way which has been pointed out to you ever since you were born."

There was no answer to be given to this. Richard wondered, with a dreary sense of the futility of the interview, when it would end. Again there was silence for a time. John Baldock was thinking. He was a fanatic, but he was not entirely destitute of common sense. "You say that you are anxious to go to Oxford," he said at last. "Why is that?"

Richard could scarcely say that the delightful freedom of an undergraduate's life as he had read about it, and as it had been described to him by older school-fellows of his own who were now enjoying it, appealed to him irresistibly, that he wanted to work and talk and laugh and play in company with his fellows, that he wanted to be a man among men and to try his powers in a larger field than he had yet known. But these were the only reasons that made him so eagerly desire Oxford, and he had to offer some expression of them which would not grate too much upon his father's prejudices.

"I like school now," he said. "I am interested in the work, and I like being with the other boys. It would be like that at Oxford, wouldn't it, only much better?"

John Baldock made no reply to this. He sat for a long time, his head on his hand, his eyes bent downwards, pondering. Richard looked out through the latticed window to the green garden. What a curious position he was in, trying to persuade his father against something that he eagerly desired! Why should he struggle any further to make himself understood? He

had done his best. If his father still persisted, could he not take what was offered to him and enjoy it, relieving himself of all responsibility in the matter? He would do so, he told himself, with a last warning which should be as straightforward and determined as he could make it. But as he said this, conscience still replied that he would be doing wrong.

"I see how it is," said John Baldock, raising himself. "It is what is called the social life that has such great attractions for you. Perhaps it is not unnatural. It meant little to me. I don't think I had above half-a-dozen acquaintances during my whole time at the University, and they were hard reading men; poor men, like myself, whose aims were very different from those of the greater part of the men around us. I regard the ordinary social life of Oxford as possessing very great dangers. Certainly it is the last sort of life in which a man who has the responsibilities of the ministry in front of him ought to take part. If it does not involve idleness—as it very often does—it means frivolity, reveling, very often sin and disgrace."

"It wouldn't mean that with me, father," said Richard, now all eager to plead; "I should work hard, and I should spend my spare time very much as I do now, only I should have more companionship. You told me that you did not mind my doing the things that I do now when I am not at work."

"Nor do I now. You are a boy. At Oxford you would be a man, embarked on a definite course of preparation for your life-work. I confess that I had not thought of the temptations of the life. I had looked upon it as a time of quiet retired study and preparation, as my own life at Oxford was. But your temperament is very different. However improved your

outlook may, and I trust will, be in the future, you are not at present constituted so as to resist such temptation. I think perhaps it is this that you have felt at the back of your mind, although you have not been able to express it, and have given me a wrong impression of the result of your thoughts. No, you are right, Richard. I see it now. If you went to Oxford it could hardly be expected that you could be brought into the state of mind in which you could receive the revelation that I believe will come to you. It is there I was wrong. Not in the main object of my desires for you, but in this one detail of carrying them out. The University is not the only training ground for Holy Orders. There are other avenues. I must think them over carefully, now that this light has come to me."

Poor Richard, his self-destructive object now accomplished, could hardly be expected to receive this further proof of his father's still determined designs with equanimity.

"It is not of the slightest use, father," he interrupted, with some impatience. "I am not going to take Holy Orders. If you will not let me go to Oxford and prepare for some other profession——"

He did not finish this sentence. John Baldock rose from his seat and stood over him. "Then, Richard," he cried, "I wash my hands of you. I will resist you no longer. Your obstinacy is grievous and wicked. Go your own way, and the responsibility be on your own shoulders."

Richard rose and left the room without another word. His heart was sore within him. He had tried to do right. He had fought against a temptation which had dressed itself in all the plausible allurements of obedience and righteousness, and had overcome it. And this

was his reward. There was nothing to lighten his depression. The whole of his life seemed to lie in ruins around him, and it seemed impossible that he should take pleasure in it again. His anger against his father burned hotly, and suffered no diminution when they met at dinner an hour or two later, and he found that the attitude to be adopted towards him was one of silent and accusing displeasure. He made one or two remarks during the course of the meal, which were received either in silence or with curt unfriendly replies. Then he relapsed into silence himself and brooded on the injustice with which he was treated.

This state of things lasted for several days. Richard's anger against his father died down in some measure, but its place was taken by a feeling very near contempt. If his father liked to sulk in that ridiculous way, he said to himself, disrespectfully, he might do so as long as he pleased. He should take no steps to put him in a more amiable temper.

It was curious that now the question had been decided once for all, and Oxford had retired out of his reach as Rugby had done five years before, his disappointment had become eased of some of its sting. The world was before him, and, however much he had been prepared to make the best of another year at school when that had been the prelude to the delights of the University, there was no doubt that independence and some definite occupation other than that of learning out of books presented still greater attractions. He thought it unlikely that his father, when he should have come to his senses and be ready to look facts in the face again, would wish him to go back to school again at all, and there was some excitement of quite a pleasurable kind in casting about in his mind for a calling which

he could take up at once, which would provide him with a small but rapidly increasing livelihood, complete independence, and work which he could thoroughly enjoy doing. It did not occur to him that such openings were somewhat rare. He was young and adventurous. There were so many things that he might do now that it was open to him to do anything he liked, and he did not despair of lighting upon something that would lead him to fame and fortune, and that by the most agreeable and expeditious of routes.

He was lying under his favourite beech throwing little sticks and stones idly into the water when there occurred to him in a flash of memory the words of his friend Meaking: "In whatever business I am, there'll always be a place for you." His hand upraised dropped to his side, and he looked out into space suddenly struck with an idea. He recalled the occasion on which the words had been spoken. It was when they had ridden to Exton together two or three years before. Meaking had talked to him then about his future, and he remembered now that he had opposed the idea of his becoming a clergyman, and advanced much the same arguments against it as he himself had lately used in his deliberations. And he had talked about his own interests in life too, and it was then that he had given the invitation which had risen to the surface of Richard's mind.

He considered the suggestion with growing appreciation of the possibilities it opened out. Meaking had now got a share in Mr. Gannett's business, had in fact the entire management of it, for the old man was in failing health and did little more than work at his catalogues and advise in the branch of the trade that he had made specially his own. It could not be long

before Meaking would have the whole of the business in his hands, and it was a thriving business, as Richard knew, for his friend kept little from him, and Mrs. Meaking was living in a state of surpassing gentility. He grew more and more enamoured of the idea of taking part in it. It had to do with books, and books he increasingly loved. No other business he could engage in would present such charms, and he supposed that business would have to be his lot, as it was unlikely he would be able to qualify for one of the learned professions. The fact that by entering it he would commit himself to the plane of retail trade did not trouble him, did not enter into his thoughts. There is something of fascination to most minds in the idea of making money by trade, and retail trade presents the most easily-grasped illustration of the process. The more his thoughts dwelt on the idea the better he liked it, and at last he sprang up from his couch on the bank of the stream and went off to saddle his pony, determined to lose no time in consulting Meaking on the subject. It was twelve o'clock, and if he rode to Storbridge now he would be away from the early dinner at which he and his father met. He had never taken this step before without asking permission, but on this occasion he did nothing but leave a message that he would not be home until late in the afternoon, saddled his pony, and rode off.

CHAPTER XXIII

MEAKING'S PROPOSAL

You must imagine Richard, now at the beginning of the nineteenth year of his age, as a young man who had already attained to his full height of about five foot ten. His fair hair still curled over his broad forehead and pleasant open face, and his blue eyes smiled at the world and hid nothing secret or shameful. Dressed in rough tweeds, and mounted on a young mare of awkward paces and no great beauty, which he had recently acquired as the result of much bargaining, his forest ponies being no longer up to his weight, he was nevertheless a figure at which you would have turned to look if you had met him trotting along the lanes on that August morning, so well did he sit in the saddle, and so full of life and youth was his slim, active figure.

He found Meaking just leaving the shop to go up to his dinner.

"Hullo, Dick!" his friend greeted him. "There's nobody I'd rather see than you. I quite miss you when the holidays are on. Come up and have a bit of dinner with mother and me."

"Are you sure it's convenient?" asked Richard. "I wanted to see you about something important, so I came straight off. I didn't think about coming to dinner."

"I dare say mother will make a fuss," returned Meaking, cheerfully. "But there's sure to be enough. Come on."

They went upstairs to a large old-fashioned room with window seats under latticed casements overlooking the street. A smell of roast mutton, agreeable enough to hungry youth, pervaded it. The table was laid for two. The clean tablecloth and shining plate and glass spoke well for Meaking's prosperity and the scale on which he lived, which was above that to which Richard was accustomed at home. He looked round him with renewed interest at the comfortable room with its easy chairs, its books, and its new bright carpet, and thought it would be pleasant to furnish and occupy such a room of his own, while Meaking went out to prepare his mother for an addition to their party.

By and by they both came in together, Mrs. Meaking with a hot face, in an undoubted fluster.

"Really, Mr. Richard," she simpered. "I am quite ashamed to receive you like this. I don't know what you'll think of us, I'm sure; me in an old dress, and nothing nice as I could wish to have it when honoured by a visit."

"Oh, come, mother," expostulated Meaking. "We'll give him as good a dinner as he gets any day of his life. A hot leg of mutton and a roly-poly pudding. You couldn't have anything better than that. You don't give him much of a welcome."

"I'm sure I'm delighted to see Mr. Richard whenever he comes," said Mrs. Meaking, "if he doesn't mind taking us as we are, and will make allowances,"

"That's all right, then," said Meaking. "Let's go into my room and have a wash, Dick, and dinner will be ready for us when we come back."

"Mother's as pleased as Punch, really," he explained, as he took off his coat in his bedroom. "I can give her pretty well what she wants now. She keeps a serv-

ant, though she don't leave much for her to do. Still, it's cheap and makes her happy. The only thing she doesn't like is living over a shop, but we'll alter that some day, I dare say."

"I think you live jolly comfortably," said Richard.

"Well, I do. I can afford it now, and I believe in living comfortably. Eat well and you'll work well. That's one of my mottoes. And how goes it with you, Dick? When are you coming back to school?"

"I don't know that I'm coming back. I wanted to talk to you about that and about something else."

"Ho, ho!" commented Meaking. "Well, perhaps we'd better leave it till after dinner. Then we can have a yarn for as long as you like. There's not much doing now, and they can always send up for me if I'm wanted."

When they got back to the sitting-room they still had to wait a short time, for Mrs. Meaking had considered it necessary to make an alteration in her costume, and could now be heard coaching her hitherto invisible helper, in subdued but anxious voice, in her duties. A shade of annoyance came over Meaking's face, as his mother sailed into the room in a black silk dress and a lace collar, and apologized for the delay by explaining that she had a new servant who had not yet got into her ways. "However others may choose to live," said Mrs. Meaking, "I like to have things nice, and the trouble I have in teaching servants to behave genteel passes belief."

The small servant who presently made her appearance in a short black frock, a cap, and an apron, like a child playing at houses, may have tickled Mrs. Meaking's sense of gentility, but she was an undisguised

nuisance from every other point of view. She relied so much upon her mistress's promptings to tell her how she was to deal with the thousand-and-one problems that arose during the course of the meal, that the simplest operation was enveloped in a haze of whispers and frowns and nudges, and conversation became an impossibility until every one had been completely supplied, and then the poor child was instructed to stand behind Mrs. Meaking's chair where she spent her time audibly sniffing, her eyes bent in an agonized gaze upon the back of her mistress's head, and at the slightest sign darted from her point of vantage to offer wildly something that nobody in the least required.

"Oh, do let Louisa go out of the room," expostulated Meaking at last, "and let's help ourselves. We shall get on twice as well." The obvious completion of the sentence, "and let's help ourselves" was "as we always do." But Meaking was loyal, and tender of his mother's weaknesses.

Mrs. Meaking flushed. "I think you had better do so, Louisa," she said, severely. "I don't know what can have come over you to-day."

Louisa fled, her dread of the scolding to come later being tempered by the most obvious relief. Mrs. Meaking made certain excuses and explanations, which Richard received with politeness, and the rest of the meal passed in a grateful peace.

"I want to have a talk with Dick, mother," said Meaking, when it was over, "if you don't mind leaving us here alone for a bit."

"Not at all," said Mrs. Meaking. "Louisa needn't clear away yet. Perhaps you'll bring Mr. Richard to say good-bye to me in the drawing-room before he goes."

"All right," said Meaking, shortly, and the two young men were left alone together.

"Well, John," said Richard, "I've made up my mind. I'm not going to be a clergyman, and I'm not going to Oxford."

"Not going to Oxford!" exclaimed Meaking. "But that's rather a change round, isn't it?"

"I've had it all out with my father. It's a long story, and I needn't go into it. But it comes to this, that the only chance I ever had of going to Oxford was to prepare for the Church, and the one goes with the other."

"I'm not surprised that you don't see your way to go into the Church. You know my views on that subject. It isn't the work you are cut out for. And you've come to feel that yourself, eh?"

"Yes. I think our views are much the same on that question, but it needed a lot of thinking out, and I must say that to lose Oxford was a very great disappointment to me."

"I'm glad you had the strength of mind to give it up, Dick. I honour you for it. And what are you going to do now?"

"I want a job in your business."

Meaking's face expressed gratification. "Oh, you do, do you?" he said. Then he laughed aloud.

Richard smiled back at him. "You promised, you know," he said. "And I want to begin at once."

"Well," said Meaking, "you're welcome to whatever I can do for you. Whether it's much or little at present remains to be considered. Does your father know of this yet?"

"I am sorry to say that my father and I are not on speaking terms just now. He can't see my reasons for

refusing to do as he wishes, and in fact he told me two or three days ago that he washed his hands of me."

"I'm sorry for that. But of course he'll come round?"

"I suppose so. But it seems to me that I must look out for something to do myself. To tell you the truth, I think I'm as capable of finding work as he is. He has no connections that would help me, so far as I know, and no money to give me a start with."

"No money, eh?"

"No. His living is not worth much, you know, and he gives away as much as ever he can afford. But why? Is money necessary if you give me a job?"

"I'll tell you how the matter stands. The business is going up steadily. What I call the legitimate book-selling business has about reached its limits. There's no scope for further enlargement here. But the book-binding that I took on a year ago—you remember—is increasing, and I am beginning to see a big development in it. But, if I'm to do what I want to do, I must take to printing as well. Now there's that old-fashioned business of Morton's in the High Street. Morton's an old man; he's made his money and he doesn't care. The business is going down and down, and I believe he'd sell it at practically the value of his machinery and stock. I don't think he'd want anything for goodwill, and, as a matter of fact, if he goes on as he's going on now for another year or two there won't be any goodwill worth a cent. The machinery's old-fashioned, but it would do to make a start with, and I could get it dirt cheap. Well, I've saved altogether about fifty pounds with what I had when I came here. It isn't much, but I've only been a partner for a year, and of course I don't get a very big share, and mother and I live well, as you

see. Mr. Gannett has put by about two hundred since I came here. I know that. But to tell you the truth I don't want Mr. Gannett in it. I only get a quarter share, and the time has come when, if I am to make the business go ahead any further, I want to reap the benefit of it myself. Now if I could get hold of another hundred and fifty pounds or so, I think I could make arrangements both with Mr. Gannett and with old Morton that would give me everything I wanted for an entirely new departure that might mean big things in the future."

"I see," said Richard, who saw in fact very little.

"As far as you're concerned," Meaking continued, "whatever happens there's a job here for you. I don't go back from my word there. I don't want to. I want you with me, and really, Dick, old boy, I was as pleased as Punch just now when you told me that you wanted to come in with me, and come in at once. I can make my way all right by myself, but I'm like that that I'd rather do it in company with somebody else. I dare say a wife might serve the purpose if she was the right sort, and I own I have thought of getting married more than once. But marriage is a lottery, I always say, and you'd be worse off than you were before if you married the wrong person. Besides, I don't know many people in the social way, and I've never seen a girl I've begun to want to marry yet. So I've given up that idea, at all events for the present.

"Well, I'm getting off the lines. But it helps me to give my tongue its run. My ideas get put better in the end. What I mean is that a chum such as you is what I want to work with, so's I can be completely happy in what I'm doing and laying out for the future, and you, especially, not only because I like you better

than anybody, but because you've got qualities which'll help in this business—education and knowledge up to a certain point, and a pleasant way with you, and so on. So there's the job. In the ordinary way it'd simply be as an assistant at the ordinary salary, and working up to a partnership, just as I've worked with Mr. Gannett, and I'd see that you got every chance of learning the details of the business and fitting yourself to be worth as much to me as possible. I tell you it wouldn't be a bad opening for you. But it so happens from what I've told you that just at this time I could do better for you than that if you could bring a bit of money into the business. I could get the money, on terms, all right; in fact, if it wasn't just you that I want to be with me, they'd be easier terms by a good deal than I should offer you for it. I shouldn't be coming to your father and asking for cash to bolster up a rotten concern. It would be a very different proposition I should have to put before him. Now don't you think he could find, say, a hundred and fifty pounds, to give you a start in a business that you and I together could work up into a big thing? You wouldn't get such a chance anywhere else, I'm certain of that."

"I don't know at all," said Richard. "I don't know anything about his affairs except what he told me the other day. He said he had about seventy pounds saved up for me which my aunt sent me from time to time when I was little."

"Well, come now, there's half of it."

"Yes, but I don't think there's much more. He said he would have to make up the rest of what I should want at Oxford if I went there out of what he gives away in charity. And I'm pretty sure he wouldn't do it for anything else."

"Anything else but Oxford?"

"Only that if it meant preparing for the Church, and not otherwise."

"I see. Well, I think I'd better talk to him about it. I *might* manage with a bit less than a hundred and fifty pounds. I'd do my level best to make it as easy for you as I could. I haven't told you yet what I should be prepared to do, Dick. I should buy Mr. Gannett out—not with cash down, of course, but I could make an arrangement. I've already sounded him about it, and I don't think he'd make any objection. His name would remain here as long as he lived, and he'd go on doing just the work he wanted. Then we should start in partnership—at *once*, my boy, and on equal terms. That's what a hundred and fifty pounds will do for you if you can raise it, or your father can. I don't think you'll get such an offer elsewhere, eh?"

It was, indeed, a munificent offer—far more munificent than Richard in his complete ignorance of business matters could possibly realize, and showed a remarkable strain of sentiment in the otherwise hard-headed, alert-minded young man who made it.

"I want you with me, Dick," he repeated, when Richard had feebly expressed his thanks. "I'll do twice as good work. We'll be as happy as the day is long struggling up together and we'll be rich men in no time."

They talked a little longer, both of them waxing more and more enthusiastic over the future, and it was arranged that Meaking should come over to Beechurst on the following morning and disclose his proposal to Richard's father. Then Richard left, having first bidden good-bye to Mrs. Meaking in her drawing-room, a

room of about ten feet square, in which she was discovered realistically reading a book.

He rode home in the highest spirits. The life of independence was about to begin for him, and he looked forward to it with fervour and delight. His late disappointment had faded away completely, and if he had now been told that after all he was to continue at school for another year and then go to Oxford he would have undergone a second disappointment.

Judging it to be politic to prepare his father for Meaking's visit on the morrow, he sought him out directly he reached home, and found him, as usual, in his study.

"I want to talk to you, father, if I may," he said.

John Baldock looked at him with disfavour.

"You have not come to tell me that you have repented of your misguided decision, I suppose," he said.

"No. I am sorry that you do not agree with me about that, but I have made up my mind."

"Then I do not think that there is anything I can discuss with you at present."

"I hope you will listen to what I have to say. I have been over to Storbridge to-day, and seen Meaking, who is now a partner in Mr. Gannett's business. There is a good opening for me there, and I should like to take it and begin work at once, if you are satisfied with what he offers me."

"If I am satisfied. You know very well that I cannot be satisfied with any occupation for you other than that I have always had in my mind."

"Can't you leave that out now, father? I have done my best to decide rightly, and——"

"I will not discuss it any further. It would only lead to the old useless round of argument. You set yourself

definitely against me. You must understand that I refuse to help you further. You must take your own line, irrespective of me."

"I am very sorry that you feel like that about it, father. If you really mean that you are going to leave me entirely to myself, I shall take whatever position Meaking is ready to offer me in his business. But I hoped you would talk it over with me, because——"

"You must understand, Richard, that I am not only sore and angry about your refusal to continue in the path I had marked out for you, but that I regard it as a deliberate resistance of Divine will on your part. You can hardly expect me to put all that from my mind, and acquiesce in a step that would finally cut you off from all chances of getting into the right path."

Richard thought for a moment as to how he was to overcome this curious obstinacy. "You know, father," he said, "if it is to happen as you think it will, and I am to be brought to see that it is right for me to take Orders, there will be nothing to prevent me doing so later on."

His father's face brightened a little. "You are beginning to think over it, and are being drawn towards the idea?" he asked.

"No. I don't want you to think I mean that. But I must do something to earn my own living, mustn't I? I can't simply sit still and do nothing."

John Baldock reflected. "I have felt so strongly——still feel so strongly that I am right in this matter," he said, "that it is almost impossible for me to discuss an alternative to the course I have had in mind. But I cannot fight against your obstinate determination if you have made up your mind. I have no weapons——none, at least, that I should think it right to use. I

shall certainly not keep you at school any longer. You are eighteen years of age, and I should have taken you away before if it had not been for my hopes for you. You are right in saying that you must do something to earn your own living, but I have never thought of having to find an opening for you. I do not know where I should have looked. What is this proposal you have had made to you?"

Probably there was some curiosity at the back of this question, but there was no doubt that with all his odd twists and perversities of character, John Baldock had a genuine conviction that he had been taught of God that Richard was to follow the course which for years he had designed for him, and was disturbed and grieved at the downfall of his hopes. The boy realized this, and was less resentful of his father's obduracy than he might have been. He explained that Meaking had offered him a situation in his shop in any case, but that if he could bring some money into the business there would be an opening for him as a partner.

"You may put that out of your head at once," said his father, when he had finished. "I have no money to do such a thing, and would not use it in that way if I had. I should consider it as definitely locking the door on the calling which I hope you will even now take up. In any case I cannot think that this offer can be a very serious one. I do not know much about business, but I am quite sure that nobody would offer a schoolboy of eighteen a half share in any business for a hundred and fifty pounds if it was worth anything."

This seemed so reasonable that Richard began to have doubts whether he had, indeed, grasped the proposal set before him.

"He says he wants me with him," he explained;

"that we can work well together, and that there is an opening for him to use money in his business."

"It is not of the slightest use even talking it over, for I have no money that I could apply to such an object, even if I judged it wise to do so."

"There is the seventy pounds which you told me Aunt Henrietta had given me when I was a child."

"Which I am not in the least prepared to hand over to you for any purpose but preparation for the life it would be right for you to take up. Not at any rate until you are of age, when you can have it to do what you like with."

"Well, I hope father, you will let Meaking talk to you about it. He is coming to see you to-morrow morning."

"I shall have no objection to talking with him. But I tell you definitely, as I shall tell him, that it is useless to apply to me for money to help him in his schemes. You had better leave me now, for I am busy."

Richard went out to walk in the forest, and to turn matters over in his mind. His father's refusal to help him in any way did not weigh on him as much as might have been expected. For one thing he had hardly anticipated acquiescence, and for another he was hardly old enough to realize the difference it might make to him to be able to join his friend as a partner in his business rather than to accept a subordinate position in it. It was the work and the new departure in his life that filled his thoughts, and of these he was assured in any case. His mind dwelt upon them with the utmost exhilaration, and he would dearly have liked to be setting out for Storbridge the very next morning to engage in the delightful occupations of business, which to

one who is of an age to dispense altogether with the thought of failure wear as romantic an aspect as any.

He had come into the wood behind the Hall, to the spot at which he had first made the acquaintance of little Lettice two years before. He looked up and recognized the hawthorn bush and the great oak with a flash of memory, and the next moment little Lettice herself was before him laughing a roguish welcome.

"What were you thinking of, Dick?" she said. "You looked as solemn as an old owl, and I believe if I had stood quite still you would have gone by without seeing me."

"But I thought you were abroad," said Richard.

"We crossed last night and got here this morning. Grandpapa got tired of Dinard, where we were staying, and indeed it is an atrocious place, all dresses and giggles and loud music. Yesterday, I said: 'Do let us go back to our dear forest,' and Grandpapa said: 'There is no better place. We will cross to-night'—you know his way. And so here we are, and I have been out all the afternoon thinking I might see you. Dick, now you must tell me a secret. It is a month since I saw you."

Richard laughed. "You little rogue," he said. "You know all the secrets of the forest as well as I do now. But I am so glad you have come back. Beechurst is very dull without you and Mr. Ventrey."

"Come in and see Grandpapa," said the child. "He'll be so pleased to see you again, Dick."

Then went into the house, and found the Squire in the library. "Well, my young friend," he greeted Richard. "Here we are back again, you see. And what have you got to tell us about yourself?"

"A great deal," Richard replied, his heart lightening

at the thought of talking over what had happened and was about to happen to him to this kind and sympathetic friend. "I should like to have a talk with you after tea, Mr. Ventrey, if I may."

"The little bird will go and amuse herself upstairs for a bit," said the Squire, "and we will talk together."

CHAPTER XXIV

DISCUSSIONS

WHEN the tea had been taken away, and Lettice had left them, Richard told his tale. It seemed to give the Squire food for thought, and some surprise.

"You gave up the chance of Oxford!" he said. "Wasn't that a little unwise?"

Richard looked and felt disappointed. He thought that his friend would have understood him.

"I don't see what else I could have done," he said. "Perhaps I haven't explained properly what I thought about it all."

The Squire reflected for a moment. "I think you have," he said. "Perhaps I failed to take into account what your father thought about it. It is difficult to understand how—but I suppose it is so. He was quite determined that you should follow out his wishes?"

"Yes."

"Then, my dear boy, I think you made the only decision that you honestly could. And I am glad you made it. The clear call—yes, he is right—it may come to a man. There are many things that may be shown to you. I should be unwilling to deny that the clerical life is one of them. But I take it that what you have to rest your mind on, if you ever have reason to doubt whether you were wise in this matter, is that you certainly feel no such call at present, and that it would have been wrong of you to bind yourself. I think that your father may see it, too, in time. But I wish—I

can't help wishing—that you had consulted me before—well, before you quite made up your mind that you would settle down at Storbridge as a country book-seller.”

He smiled as he said it, but Richard felt for the first time that the calling he was about to embrace with such ardour was not of the most exalted. He made no reply, and the Squire went on:—

“Please do not think of me as despising any work which a man may see fit to take up, if it is clean work and work that he can interest himself in. You personally would, no doubt, find any work having to do with books interesting—up to a certain point. But you know, Dick, there are ways of making a living out of books other than selling them, and I had rather hoped that you might, when you had finished your education, have found out one of those ways. It has seemed to me that that would, perhaps, be the natural outcome of your circumstances.”

“You mean writing books?”

“Yes. I only say perhaps, because I think that a man has to be called, as your father would say, to the writing of books, in much the same way as he must be called to the Church, although you must not tell him that I said so. And, of course, the call can hardly have come to you yet. But with Oxford—with some years ahead of you—well, I can't help wishing you were going to Oxford.”

“I wanted to, very much,” replied Richard. “But when I saw that my only chance of going to Oxford was by binding myself in the way I have told you, I put it out of my mind altogether, and thought about something else. I hoped you would think I was right to do that.”

The Squire looked at him rather quizzically. "I expect," he said, "that if you had the chance of going to Oxford offered to you now, without conditions, you would feel some disappointment at having to give up the other scheme. Don't you think so?"

Richard looked rather serious for a moment. "It isn't quite like that," he said. "I am keen to start at once, and I look forward to the work I shall have to do. But if I had the opportunity of going to Oxford I should take it."

"I think you would be wise. At your age, when the spirit of adventure is strong and energy both of mind and body is at its highest, the prospect of beginning your life's fight with the world is invigorating, and to spend four or five years longer in gaining knowledge seems an unambitious proceeding—except for the born student, and you are not that. At the same time, at the end of those years, you would be better equipped for the struggle, and you would have gained something that you would never have another opportunity of gaining."

Richard was silent.

"Of course," pursued the Squire, "I assume that you would make use of the opportunities—that you would not merely stroll through a University course making friends and generally enjoying yourself, nor even work unintelligently for a good degree. There are young men to whom it is useful just to live for three or four years at a University. Their outlook in life is widened, and they make friendships of a sort they might otherwise miss. I don't think you are one of them. And as for University honours, there are very few to whom they can be of much value in themselves.

I am quite sure you are not one of that few. No. If you went to Oxford, you would have to go with the idea of gaining knowledge and wisdom. Do you think you could keep that end in view among all the attractions of the place? It might be difficult."

"I don't know. I am not sure that I should know how to set about it."

"I am not sure that you would either. It is a pity that these chances should be given almost exclusively to those who are not of an age to appreciate them. Still I think you would learn, and I am sure that you would be better equipped for whatever work you took up afterwards than you can be now. We are friends, Dick, you and I. And friends ought to help each other. I want to help you to get your start in life. I offer you now what your father does not feel himself able to give you. I have thought for some time that it might be my privilege to do so. Put aside for the time this offer of your other friend's and accept mine. Go to Oxford and learn as much as you can, and let us talk afterwards of what you shall do next."

Richard blushed furiously. "It is very good of you, indeed, Mr. Ventrey," he stammered. "But I——"

"It will be a great pleasure to me," said the Squire. "A very great pleasure; you may believe that. But do not decide now. Go and think it over, as you thought over the other question, and come and see me again when you have made up your mind. Don't consult your father. We can do that after you have come to a decision. Think it out for yourself."

So Richard went away with another problem to face. It may be doubted whether he was as well equipped for deciding this one as the other. There was

no matter of principle involved. He would feel no false shame in accepting the bounty of his friend, and he was bound to nothing except to make the best possible use of the opportunities provided for him.

He thought it over as he went home. He was loth to give up the prospect of immediate occupation and independence, but, on the other hand, the prospect of Oxford appealed to him strongly, perhaps more strongly than ever, now that it was conjoined with freedom of thought and action. He had bent his mind during the past week to looking ahead into the future, and did so now with a clearer vision than boys of his age are usually capable of applying. It seemed to him that in the circumstances in which he was placed the University ought to lead to something in the way of occupation afterwards. He would have to make a living. How would Oxford help him? He went over in his mind the careers of the few young men he knew who had been to Oxford or Cambridge. Two or three were in the Church, but that he had already decided against. Some were schoolmasters, but that calling presented no attractions to him. One was a barrister without briefs, who made a poor living out of journalism. Another was a country solicitor, a partner in a family firm. None of these occupations were nearly so attractive as that which Meaking had offered him. Mr. Ventrey had shown what he had in his mind for him. He was to learn as much as he could at the University, and then he was to write. He thought over this suggestion carefully. He loved books, but he had never had the slightest wish to write them. What sort of books was he to write? He had heard a good deal lately about being "called" to an occupation in life. He felt no impulsion in this direction. The idea of it was even a little

disagreeable to him, as of something strange and difficult.

He felt suddenly that the decision was beyond his powers. He must take advice, not of his father, although he would have liked to talk the matter over with his father; but Mr. Ventrey had asked him not to. He thought he would like to talk to Mr. Ventrey again himself, and get a clearer view of his plans for him. And Meaking, to whom he owed something for the generosity of his offer—he ought to have Meaking's opinion. And Meaking was coming over to Beechurst the next morning. He would go and meet him and hear his views. He must wait on events. He could decide nothing until the morrow.

But through the rest of the evening the thought of Oxford returned to him continually, and drew him with increasing strength. And the words that Mr. Ventrey had used, "a country bookseller," not with contempt but with kindly criticism, influenced him, perhaps, more than he knew. His position as Meaking's partner and lifelong companion was a factor in the case which deserved consideration, although, hitherto, he had given it none. He went to bed with his mind ill at ease, quite unable now to decide what he really wished to do.

The next morning he rode into Storbridge, leading a second pony. Meaking had intended to walk to Beechurst, but he knew that he would rather ride at least one way. As he trotted and walked the ponies along the summer roads between the forest aisles and out amongst the water meadows, it came to him for the first time that his boyhood was nearly over, that, whatever his future should be, it would take him into busy scenes, and that his dealings would be with men and not with the things of nature amongst which he had hitherto

lived his life. He felt the strong charm of the forest and the open country, and realized with a touch of sadness that the years in which it could provide the chief interest of life were coming to an end for him. "After all," he said to himself, "I believe I should be happiest as a forester, living by my hands." But he knew, as he said it, that such a life would not satisfy him. He had passed the turning, and his path no longer led onward through the forest ways.

He met Meaking just outside Storbridge, already on the road, and handed over his mount. When the ponies' heads were turned towards home he told him of the new complication that had arisen.

"I'm not surprised," said Meaking. "I thought it might happen in that way. Mr. Ventrey thinks a deal of you, and I thought that probably he would consider it a come-down for you to take up the job I've offered you. I dare say he said as much, eh?"

"Well, he did say something of the sort. I don't say that I agree with him."

"You probably will, though, if he talks to you much more about it." Meaking threw a searching glance at him. "Mind you," he said, "I don't deny that it is a come-down, in a way. You're a gentleman born, and you're proposing to go into retail trade. That's always considered a come-down, though why, I don't know. Lots of gentlemen would do very well at it who haven't got the capacity for other sorts of business. And after all a man isn't the best sort of gentleman who depends on what he does for his gentility, instead of what he is."

"Oh, I know all that," Richard said, a little impatiently. "I assure you that that side of the question doesn't trouble me much."

"I'm not sure that it won't, though, if Mr. Ventrey puts himself against it. There's just this to be said about it. I don't propose that we shall remain retail booksellers all our lives, or, indeed, very much longer. I've got bigger schemes in my head than that, and I think in a few years' time we might be in a pretty big way."

"In what way?"

"I'm not quite prepared to say yet. But if we manage to fix things up together, we'll go into it thoroughly together. Lor', what times we'll have! You're eighteen now. By the time you're twenty-two or three, just when you'd have finished with the University, and looking about for something to start on, you'll be in the thick of a most interesting business, and probably making a lot of money." Meaking's red face glowed with enthusiasm. He dug his heels into his pony's flanks, and cantered along a stretch of grass by the roadside for a quarter of a mile. When they were pacing quietly along the road together again, Richard said:—

"Of course, I'm very grateful to you for all you're offering me. I know it's a lot. But I haven't quite made up my mind to accept it yet. I must think over Mr. Ventrey's offer too. It is a very generous one, and I feel it would be a serious thing to give up the chance of going to Oxford, unless I felt quite sure in my own mind that it would be better not to take it."

"I'm quite certain that you'd better not take it. I know you better than Mr. Ventrey does. You're not of the stuff they make real scholars of, and what could the University do for you if it wasn't that? You'd have a very jolly time there. I know that. And you'd make a lot of pleasant friends. But after it was over where would you be? No nearer to making a living

than you are now—and four or five years older. You wouldn't be so near, for I tell you I shall be a long way ahead then, and I couldn't give you the opportunity then that I'm willing to give you now. What should you have to turn to?"

"Mr. Ventrey seems to think I ought to write."

"What about? If you had it in you to be a successful author you'd have been nibbling at it by this time. So far as I know you've never set pen to paper unless you were obliged."

"That's quite true. And I don't know that I want to. But how can I tell now what I shall want to do in four or five years' time? I wish to goodness I had some one to advise me. Really, you know, it's a lot for me to decide."

"You mean you're too young? I don't think so. You're eighteen. I'd made up my mind about things before I was your age, and now I'm on the road to success. And I haven't had your advantages of education. I don't say that education isn't a good thing. I'm not such a fool, though I haven't had much of it myself, as I say. But when you've got your own way to make you simply can't afford to spend four or five years of the most important part of your life over it. You must do with what you've got. And, after all, you can go on educating yourself all the time, and you will, if you're keen on it. If you're not you wouldn't do it at Oxford, either. You'll just slack about and amuse yourself."

"It's a difficult question," said Richard undecidedly.

"Come now," returned Meaking. "Look it in the face. What do you want to go to Oxford for?"

"Wouldn't you want to go if you were me, and had

the chance? You know quite well that I've been looking forward to it for years, and always thought I was going as a matter of course until a week ago."

"Yes, but you've had your eyes opened since then. You're more of a man than you were. You've been obliged to face things, and you've faced them well, and come out of it well. A week ago you were a school-boy. Of course you looked forward with pleasure to going to Oxford then. Jolly place and all that—and rowing and larks and rows and independence, and I don't know what. Now, you're a man. You've had to look seriously into the future during the last week and you've got to go on doing so. If you still have Oxford in your mind, you've got to decide now *why* you want to go, and you've got to see that the reason is a good one, for you'll be giving up something for it—and giving up more than you know, too. Come, now, be honest with yourself. Why do you want to go to Oxford—now, after all that's happened?"

Richard laughed. "You are very peremptory," he said.

"Stand up to yourself, and don't allow any nonsense; that's one of my mottoes," said Meaking. "Let's have the answer, Dick. You said you wanted advice. Give it to yourself."

"Why do I want to go to Oxford?" said Richard, good-humouredly. "Well, I suppose, because—because—because I want to go to Oxford."

"There you have it," exclaimed Meaking, triumphantly. "You couldn't have given a better answer. We'll leave it at that, and, when you're thinking over the question by yourself, remember that that's really all the reason you've got, and don't try and persuade yourself that you've got a better one. I wish they'd

cut down these seedling firs. They are choking up all the open spaces.”

They came presently to Beechurst, and dismounted in the stable-yard of the rectory, where Job was pothering about with a bucket.

“Morning, Job,” said Meaking, cheerfully, as he took off his cap, and mopped his forehead. “Pretty hot, eh?”

“Sun ain’t in yet, seemin’ly,” replied that retainer, in obvious allusion.

“You’d give a good deal to have some of it,” said Meaking. “You’re getting as bald as an egg.”

Job turned on him angrily. “Look here, I don’t want none o’ *your* sauce, you carrotty young varmint. They tell me you’re getting a big man over to Storbridge, but you’re nothing but dirt here, the same as you always was.”

“That’s true, I’m afraid,” said Meaking philosophically, as he and Richard went into the house. “What do they say?—a prophet hath no honour. Well, I hope Mr. Baldock will think I’m a little better than dirt.”

The Vicar with whom he found himself closeted a few minutes later, if he did not show that he regarded him as dirt, hardly treated him as if he thought him of great importance, either at Storbridge or anywhere else. He seemed, indeed, to have forgotten that he was to be consulted on a matter of some moment.

“I hope your mother is well,” he said, “and that you’re doing well at your work, and giving satisfaction to your employer.”

“Mother is well, and comfortably situated, thank you sir,” replied Meaking. “And as for my employer, I’m giving him every satisfaction. I’m my own employer, now.”

"Oh," said John Baldock, a little taken aback by this directness of speech.

"I've come to talk to you, sir, about Richard," began Meaking, determined to waste no time in coming to the point. "He wants work, and I'm in a position to offer it to him, and good terms with it."

The Vicar swallowed an apparently painful reflection.

"He did say something to me about it, now that I remember," he replied. "He has seen fit to object to the plans that I have made for his future, and I cannot pretend that I am pleased with him just now."

"No, sir," said Meaking, "but of course you don't want to discuss that with me. I know that he doesn't see his way to fall in with your wishes, and I won't pry into the reasons, which don't concern me."

"Naturally," replied John Baldock, stiffly; "I shouldn't wish to go into these matters with you."

"Quite so, sir. The thing is settled; and as he has got to make up his mind now, from what he tells me, to take up some other means of livelihood, I thought I'd bring forward my proposal, which I don't think you'd better."

"What is your proposal?"

"I want Richard as my partner—half and half share—in a good and growing business, and I'm willing to take him in with a hundred and fifty pounds to be used in the business."

"That is what he told me. I thought he must be making some mistake. I have very little acquaintance with business men or business habits, but I cannot think that anybody would be willing to offer such terms to a mere schoolboy, if the business was really prosperous and satisfactory."

"The prosperity of the business, sir, is a matter of facts and figures, which can be seen from the books, by you or any one you like to appoint to look into them. There isn't a business man in the country who wouldn't tell you that the offer is an exceptionally good one."

"You are in Mr. Gannett's business, are you not? What is to become of Mr. Gannett? Has he been consulted in this matter?"

"As I told Richard, sir, I think I could make arrangements to buy him out. I'm pretty sure I could, or I should wait before I made the proposition."

"Buy him out? Then, that's what you want money for."

Meaking allowed himself a gentle laugh. "A hundred and fifty pounds wouldn't buy him out, sir," he said. "We shouldn't pay him hard cash. We should give him a certain portion of the profits."

"And you, a young man of—what? twenty-one, and Richard, a boy of eighteen, would expect to carry on the business successfully without the advantage of his long experience. That doesn't seem to me a scheme that shows great possibilities of success."

"I don't expect you, sir, to give me the credit that belongs to me for my business capabilities, knowing me chiefly as a mischievous young scamp about the village; but the books will show to any one who knows how to read them that Mr. Gannett's long experience only enabled him to make a bare living out of the business, and that since I've had to do with it, and especially since I've been a partner, it has not only kept Mr. Gannett very well, but me and mother too, though I only get a quarter share. And it's got to the point where it can be greatly extended if a little fresh capital

is put in. And as for Mr. Gannett, I should hope he'd still work at his branch of it as long as he lived."

The Vicar was somewhat impressed, though against his will, by the young man's confidence. "I should like to know, then," he said, "why you are making this exceptionally good offer to Richard."

"Because I want a partner, and he's the partner I want. I know I could get one who'd put in a deal more money than I'm asking of him—and I'm putting that as low as I reasonably can. But I might not be able to work comfortably with him. I shouldn't know him as I do Richard. I'm quite sure he'll be worth the present sacrifice to me in the long run—else I shouldn't want him. It's a business proposal as far as I'm concerned, though it doesn't look like it."

"How do you know that he has the capabilities you require?"

"Because I'm a judge of character, sir, hoping you'll pardon the seeming boastfulness. He's fond of books; it comes natural to him to pick up a lot about them, where other people wouldn't gather anything. And he's a good worker, and cheerful and friendly with it all; and generally liked. And he's enterprising—at least, he will be when he gets to work on something he's cut out for. Those are the qualities I want in my partner, and I'm willing to pay high for them."

"It seems that we are expected to do the paying."

"You can put it in that way if you like, sir. But you can hardly expect to get what I'm offering for nothing. And you wouldn't be paying me anything either. The money would go into the business and he'd benefit by it as much as I should. With the developments I have in my mind, we should have to keep as much of our profits in the business as possible, and, of

course, Mr. Gannett would take a large share of them; but I should take out a hundred a year for the present for my own use and Richard could do the same, or he could leave some of it in to bear interest. That's not a bad return on a hundred and fifty capital; and of course there would be much more in the future."

It seemed to John Baldock an extraordinarily good return, and the idea of it rather took his breath away. But he recovered himself quickly. "I don't know whether you have the power to carry out your intentions or not," he said. "I am not capable of judging. Probably you are far too sanguine. But it would be quite useless to discuss it further, for there is no possibility of my being able to provide the sum you mention. Richard has seventy pounds of his own, and that I should be willing to allow him to use for the purpose, if a thorough investigation by a competent third party showed it to be advisable. More than that I could not do."

Meaking's face had flushed a little during the last speech. "As I told you, sir," he said, "I have no objection to everything being examined by any one you like to appoint. In the meantime it will save irritation if you'll kindly take it that I am making a *bona fide* offer which will be at least as much to the advantage of your side as to mine."

The Vicar looked at him closely. The last occasion on which he had held any dealings with this self-reliant and apparently capable young man was when he had summoned him to his presence and rebuked him sternly for the sin of cracking nuts in church. It was he who was now being rebuked, and he did not quite like it.

"I shall certainly reserve my independence of judgment on the subject," he said, stiffly. "The factor in

the situation that I can understand is that you want a considerable sum of money, and——”

“I want Richard as a partner, sir,” interrupted Meaking, hotly. “And I’m offering to take him in on very generous terms. I won’t have my offer thrown in my face as if I had come here to try for something for myself.”

The disagreeable side of John Baldock’s character, always pushing to assert itself, was aroused by his tone. “That is not the way for you to address me,” he said arrogantly. “I would have you remember our respective positions.”

Meaking gave a short laugh. “Yes,” he said, “I suppose I’m still dirt here in Beechurst, whatever I’ve made myself elsewhere. I’ve been told so. Well, there’s my offer, Mr. Baldock, and I think you would be wise to think it over. And any one you like to appoint to look into the business will have every assistance I can give him. I won’t keep you any longer now.”

He rose to go. The Vicar did not offer to shake hands with him. “I think you may consider the matter closed,” he said. “I should not care for my son to go into partnership with you.” Then he returned to his books with an unpleasant expression on his face, and Meaking left him.

CHAPTER XXV

TWO SIDES OF A QUESTION

RICHARD hung about the house while the interview just described was in progress. When Meaking went out he was in the garden and missed him. After half an hour he ventured near the window of his father's study, and saw his head bent over the table, and realized that he was alone. He made inquiries in the house and found, somewhat to his surprise, that Meaking had gone without trying to find him to relate what had happened. He dared not go in to his father; and, indeed, Mr. Ventrey's request that he would not discuss with him the question that was exercising his mind made him rather shy of discussing any question. He felt the request to be irksome, and suddenly made up his mind, when he discovered that there was no hope of his seeing Meaking again just then, to go to the Squire and ask him to withdraw it. To his surprise, when he reached the Hall he learnt that Meaking himself was in the library with Mr. Ventrey, but when his name was taken in he was asked to join them.

"Well, Dick," said the Squire, when he went in. "It is you and your future we are discussing. You may as well take part in our conclave, as you are most concerned. Mr. Meaking is kind enough to be giving me his views as to the proper career for you to take up."

Meaking looked rather ill at ease, sitting in a high oak chair opposite to his host who was ensconced in a low easy one. He sat well forward, holding his hat

between his knees and twirling it nervously by the brim. Obviously, he was finding it more difficult to hold his own in a conversation with the Squire than with the Vicar.

"I was waiting for you," said Richard. "Why didn't you let me know you had finished talking to father?"

"I was rather upset," replied Meaking. "He didn't treat me quite as I like to be treated. I went straight out and was opposite the Hall before I thought about you. Then I thought I would come and ask Mr. Ventrey if he would kindly let me speak to him about it."

"We are in the middle of thrashing the matter out," put in the Squire. "Mr. Meaking is anxious that you should become a bookseller, and is prepared to do all in his power to make you a successful one. But he has learnt that I am in the way with my proposal that you shall first of all finish your education; and when you came in he was advancing reasons why I should—well, I can't express it better than by saying, get out of the way."

It was said in the most easy agreeable manner, but there was a look on the smiling face of the speaker that gave more point to the sarcasm of the speech than to its pleasant tone. Mr. Ventrey meant to fight, and it was plain that Meaking was finding him a formidable adversary.

But Meaking did not lack courage and was prepared to fight too, to meet delicate rapier play by broadsword strokes, and to acknowledge as little as possible his opponent's advantage of position.

"In the ordinary way," he said, with an air of candid honesty, "I shouldn't put my opinions against yours, sir. You're a gentleman high above me, with knowl-

edge and experience I can't lay claim to. But I've thought over this and I'd like to tell you how it strikes me."

This appeal would not have failed in the usual course to draw a generous acknowledgment from the Squire, and Richard was rather surprised to hear him reply, in an unmoved voice, "I think the ordinary way ought to be your way now, Mr. Meaking. I can quite confidently accept your tribute. My knowledge and experience of the world must be and actually is far greater than yours, and it leads me to a different conclusion from the one you have come to. You have told me how it strikes you, and my conviction is still unshaken."

"I've only begun to tell you, sir," replied Meaking, doggedly. "It's only fair that you should hear what it is I'm offering, and what he'd be giving up if he accepts your offer instead, before you turn me out."

"I have not the slightest wish to turn you out, Mr. Meaking," said the Squire, always speaking with great courtesy. "And if you have not already told me what your offer is, I should like to hear it."

Meaking, driven by nervousness, plunged hurriedly into a diffuse statement of the success that might be expected to attend an enterprising extension of his present business. He made none of the paths by which it was to come very clear, and to an unprejudiced listener would have been thought to be depicting a state of affairs existing solely in his own sanguine imagination and unlikely to come into actual being. Mr. Ventrey heard him politely to the end, kept his eye fixed upon him, and gave him no assistance as parentheses and afterthoughts fell from his lips, confusing instead of enlightening his meaning. Richard felt anxiously disappointed as he heard his friend muddling away the

effect of his statement and quite failing to make the impression he desired. He had the inclination to strike in and help him, and made a motion as if to do so once, but Mr. Ventrey held up his hand, and Meaking finished his exposition, tailing off to an ineffective ending and taking out his handkerchief to wipe the perspiration from his forehead when his ordeal was at last over.

The Squire turned calmly towards Richard. "Well, Dick," he said, "it is for you to decide. You have heard what Mr. Meaking hopes to be able to do for you if you join him in his business. Will you do so, or will you go to Oxford?"

Richard felt supremely uncomfortable. He blushed a deep red, and shifted uneasily in his chair. Then he blurted out, "I think you ought to give him a chance, Mr. Ventrey."

For the first time since he had known him Richard saw his friend's face change its almost invariable expression of courteous self-possession to one of angry annoyance.

"Kindly tell me what you mean," he said, sharply.

Richard cleared his throat and, with his eyes cast down, said, "He told you that in the ordinary way he would think it cheek of him to put his opinion against yours. But he has thought a lot about this, and wants to tell you what his opinion is, and you don't help him."

"I wanted to put it to you, sir," added Meaking, "and see if you didn't agree with me."

Mr. Ventrey had recovered himself. He smiled. "Well, I don't agree with you," he said. "But come now, let us take for granted for the moment what you have by no means convinced me of, that your offer provides a great opportunity for a prosperous career for our friend. Let us take that for granted, I say;

and now tell me as plainly as you can why you think Dick ought to embrace it now at once and give up the great advantages of education which he cannot possibly have offered to him later on. I will give full consideration to your views. It is no less than what opponents in argument ought to do."

The tension—it is difficult to say how, for the Squire still kept his gaze fixed upon the speaker—was removed, and Meaking took heart and began again.

"He ought to come in now," he said, "because if he waits for four or five years, although I'd still take him, I couldn't offer anything like the same terms as I can to-day."

"That supposes you will have the complete success you anticipate," said the Squire. "But the point is one that we are taking for granted. What I understand is that you feel he would be wrong to go to the University in any case, and I want to know why."

"Well, sir, I can't put it as plain as I could wish, and of course I don't know much about Oxford, but I think I know enough to say that, as he's got to earn his living whether he goes there or not, he can't afford to waste four or five years before he begins to do it."

"You really look upon a university education as pure waste of time, Mr. Meaking?"

"No, sir, that isn't my meaning. If a young man has got his future all laid out for him, and needn't worry about ways and means, let him take all the education he can and go on as long as he likes, and be thankful for the chance. If he's not so situated—and you can't say that Baldock is—then I look upon it as waste of time. You may waste time over a good thing as well as a bad. Sleep's a good thing when you're working hard; but there may come a time when you have to

work so hard for a spell that you've got to knock off some of your times of sleep; you'd be wasting time if you didn't."

"That is a good illustration, and you have made your point clear, but you have forgotten that the University, besides being a place of pure education, and offering advantages that perhaps you are right in saying only those who have no anxieties as to their future are capable of enjoying, is very largely, and perhaps chiefly, used as an actual stepping-stone to future employment, generally of a higher kind, although possibly not more lucrative, than could be taken up by those unable to use it."

"What kind of employment, sir?"

"I expect you know as well as I do. All the learned professions and the higher posts in the Government service, as well as numerous other occupations which can only be filled by men whose brains have been exercised by the best education. The fact is, Mr. Meaking—and I hope you will forgive my emphasizing it—that you are intensely interested in the money-making side of life."

"I don't think money-making is everything, sir," interrupted Meaking.

"I do not accuse you of doing so. You have had success in a business which exercises the brain in a more humane way than most, and I have not the slightest doubt that you value that factor in it; but you do not value it nearly so much as the larger factor of money-making, do you?"

"I don't know, sir. I am not sure that I don't."

"I am quite sure. Your good partner, Mr. Gannett, undoubtedly does, but you pride yourself on being a far better business man than he is."

"Nobody could say that I wasn't."

"On the money-making side, certainly not. In every other respect you are far inferior to him, and you would show great partiality of mind if you were to deny it. From what Richard has told me of you, I am assured that you have used your opportunities well, and are justified in being proud of your present situation and satisfied with the way you are conducting your life. But you will forgive me again for saying that the career that would satisfy you ought not to satisfy one of already superior education, and in some respects of superior powers. You see I speak quite plainly. At the best you are offering my friend the chance of becoming a rich man by means of a pleasant, and, as far as it goes, a worthy occupation. I want to give him the chance of becoming something better than a rich man; and the way I propose to do it is by giving him the education which will fit him to take opportunities when they come and make the best of them. If I may use myself as a poor example, I am not altogether unknown in the world, but I am not known by the amount of wealth I enjoy—should, indeed, be better known if that wealth did not encourage me to live a more idle contemplative life than I should want if I were without it."

The point of view, perhaps, was rather beyond Meaking's mental horizon. He realized it dimly as a not unreasonable one, but the intensely practical side of his mind clung to actualities.

"Education's a good thing," he said. "I don't deny it. And of course it helps you to become great if you've got it in you to become great. But I don't believe Dick Baldock has, and he knows I think so. If he has, he'll be great anyhow. I believe what I'm offer-

ing him will just suit him. Perhaps you're right, sir, about the money-making. But that will be my part of the business. His will be the other side. It's what he's fitted for by nature, and I believe he'll be thoroughly happy in it."

"He would be better fitted for it, as well as for anything else, if he spent the next few years in educating himself all around," said the Squire. "And he is too young—in mind, if not in years—to bind himself down to his life-work. He may change; he is bound to develop. I want to see him a man armed all round for his conflict with life. I shall not mind in ten years' time—nobody whose opinion is worth having will mind—whether he is rich or not. I shall mind if he is narrow and obscure. Come, Dick, my friend, it is for you to decide."

"Wait a minute, sir," put in Meaking, hurriedly. "Let me speak plainly, and no offence meant or taken. Look at the practical side. He must make a living. If you send him to Oxford, you ought to go further. You ought to see him started afterwards. Perhaps it won't matter in ten years' time if he's rich or not, but it will matter if he's not making enough to get married on. That's the chief thing in life, after all—to have a home of your own, and someone to share it with you. I feel that, though I'm young yet, and with no plans of the sort in my head. Give him the chance of that, and I'll stand aside and say no more to influence him."

"I do give him that chance," replied the Squire. "I meant nothing else. When he has gone through what I look upon as his time of probation, I will start him on the road. And if the road leads in the direction you have made up your mind it should lead, Mr. Meaking, that is the road I will start him on. He shall lose

no advantage by my interference, I can assure you, and I promise him, by my long experience of life, that he shall gain immeasurably."

Meaking rose from his seat. "Then I've nothing more to say," he said. "Except that I'm bitterly disappointed for my own sake, and very doubtful for his. Good-evening, sir, and thank you for your kind attention." With which he walked out of the room and out of the house and along the dusty six-mile road to Storbridge, a prey to acute depression.

Richard started up, as he passed him on his way down the long room, but made no effort to detain him. He stood irresolutely as the door closed. "He is a good fellow," he cried, not without distress in his voice. "Don't you see it, Mr. Ventrey?"

"I do see it," said the Squire. "He is the best of fellows, with a heart of gold, a most amazing industry and enterprise, and quite a gift of sound, if limited, philosophy. But he is not of the clay, my dear Dick, that you should be advised to ally yourself with for life. Not unless you have failed amongst men of a higher order of intelligence. And my hope is that you will gratify an old man by taking his advice and will set yourself from now to spend the next few years of your fortunate youth in the pursuit of knowledge—not," he added with a pleasant smile, "under altogether disagreeable surroundings."

"Oh, Mr. Ventrey, you are good," said Richard, with emotion. "I can't do more than thank you, and do my best."

"Then that is settled," said the Squire, with satisfaction, "and I must have an interview with your father as soon as possible."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE THIRD SIDE

MR. VENTREY, having once gained Richard's assent to his project, lost no time in its further pursuance. He sent a message to the Vicar early in the afternoon, to ask him to pay him a visit, and when he arrived fired his whole broadside into him.

"I asked you to come to see me, Mr. Baldock," he said, "because I want to talk to you about your son. As you know, I have a great affection for him, as well as a great respect for his character and abilities. A man of my age may well have the privilege of doing something to help on his younger friends, and I want you to allow me to be responsible for Richard's further education and for his start in life."

John Baldock was completely at a loss. Among his faults could not be counted that of subservient watchfulness of riches, and it had never entered his mind that either he or his son might benefit in a pecuniary way from the Squire's wealth and generosity.

"I—I suppose I ought to express my gratitude, Mr. Ventrey," he stammered, after a short silence; "but, really the idea is so new to me, that——"

"There is no occasion for gratitude," pursued the Squire. "It gives me great pleasure to be able to do this for the boy. And I do not wish to put you personally under any obligation to me. I think that Richard cannot do better than continue at Storbridge Grammar School for another year, and I suppose that you

will see to that. But afterwards I should like to take the responsibility on my shoulders. I will see that he has everything that he can want at Oxford, and probably, when he has finished with the University, there will be a year or two of preparation for whatever pursuit he takes up before he can expect to be earning his own living. That time also I will make myself responsible for."

John Baldock had been collecting his thoughts during the progress of the foregoing speech. Now he spoke with less hesitation.

"The offer," he said, "is, of course, a munificent one. And I thank you, Mr. Ventrey, sincerely, and once for all, for its intention. But I must have time to think it over. It implies obligations on my side that I cannot disassociate myself from. By taking upon yourself the cost of Richard's further education you would, I suppose, expect to have the leading voice in settling his life-work. And I cannot close my eyes to the fact that your ideas on that subject would be widely different from mine."

"You put the case clearly, Mr. Baldock. But I have no axe of my own to grind. What I should do would be to watch the development of the boy's tastes and aptitudes closely, and advise him to the best of my ability towards a career. But I take it that you would be in the same position, and that your advice would carry as much weight as mine."

"I fear not. In fact, I think your advice on this very subject has already outweighed mine. For the past five years, ever since he was of an age at which the subject could be fitly considered, I have had only one career in my mind for Richard: by far the highest career which any one can follow—the ministry of

the Gospel. I had no reason to suppose that he himself looked upon this holy work in anything but the right spirit. But he has definitely refused now to consider it. I would not press him to it against his will, and I have now put the idea out of my mind entirely, as I can see that his determination is strongly set against it. This change in him I can only put down to your influence. It has long been in my mind to say this, and I say it now without fear."

"There is no occasion for fear, Mr. Baldock. I can respect a man who speaks out plainly what is in his mind. I hope that you have the same power, for I will speak just as plainly. It is only through the glasses of prejudice that you can have regarded your boy as marked out for a teacher of your own religion, for I do not imagine that you ever had in mind the possibility of his following any variant of it. To every impartial eye he must have been seen to be unfitted for it, both by temperament and trend of mind."

"His trend of mind has been greatly altered since you made a confidant of him."

"Please let me finish. You accused me just now of influencing him in the decision to which you have alluded. I did nothing of the sort. He has always taken it for granted in his conversation with me that he was to take Orders after leaving Oxford, and I have said nothing to dissuade him from the step. Whether I should have gone on keeping silence on what I have always looked upon as a grave mistake is another question. But I should have done or said nothing behind your back. You will do me the justice to remember that the crisis which resulted in his rejecting your plans for him occurred while I was away. It was only when I returned that he told me that he had made the

decision for himself. It was a decision of which I thoroughly approve, and still more do I approve of the spirit of honesty in which it was made. My opinion of the boy is higher, if possible, than it was before. You, in the, perhaps, natural disappointment you have suffered from, have not cared, apparently, to accord him any credit for the sacrifice he was prepared to make, and was, as a matter of fact, obliged to make, in order to preserve his independence of mind."

"What sacrifice do you allude to? I do not understand you."

"Do you think it is a small thing for a boy of his age to give up the idea of going to the University, and to be told to turn out at once to make his living without help from you, his father, or anybody?"

John Baldock suddenly became excited. "I am not to be driven into a decision on a matter of such moment with unthinking suddenness," he said. "It is a matter that is continually in my thoughts, and I arrive at conclusions in my own way. An opening has occurred in which I can assist him, and I am strongly tempted to close with it. But I will not be hurried."

"The temptation must have attacked you rather suddenly, Mr. Baldock," said the Squire, drily. "I know to what you refer, and I have heard that when the opening was offered to you, a very few hours ago, you rejected it somewhat contemptuously."

"So that is known to you, Mr. Ventrey. It seems to me that I was right in saying that my son's own plans for his future are discussed with you more freely than with me."

"That is not what you said. If it had been, I should not have contradicted you. Can you be surprised at it?"

The father's face fell. He was too free from guile to care to hide the fact that the shot had told.

"What you did say," pursued the Squire, "was that I had influenced your son against your wishes. And that I deny."

"I repeat the accusation," said John Baldock, once more becoming heated. "It has not been done directly, perhaps, but the influence has worked with every word you have spoken. You have inoculated the boy with your views of life. They are not the views of a Christian. They have a specious air of high-mindedness—I am well aware of that, and they are all the more insidious and dangerous on that account. As a minister of Christ's Gospel, it is my duty to tell you that the views you hold and freely express, not to those who can refute them, but to the young and impressionable, are more soul-destroying than open blasphemies against the truth."

"That, I know, is the view of you and your co-religionists," replied the Squire, apparently unmoved by this outburst. "It seems to me a very shocking view for a man who preaches the gospel of charity to hold. But I am not concerned to refute it. As far as Richard is concerned, if I read him aright, he must have come to reject it in time, even if my baleful example had never affected him. But come, Mr. Baldock, let us cease from these recriminations. We both have the welfare of your boy at heart. You have admitted yourself that your hopes of making a clergyman of him are at an end. Surely we can combine to help him to some other career which both of us will be happy to see him embarked on. Let us settle on the preliminary of Oxford, and leave the rest till a later date."

John Baldock rose. "No," he said, decisively.

"My mind is now clear. He shall not be placed in an atmosphere of doubt and infidelity. For such a nature as his there is nothing spiritually stimulating in such a place as Oxford. I have already refused to countenance his going to the University unless it is with the direct determination to resist the spirit of levity and prepare quietly for a life of teaching and service. As he has rejected that, I choose that he shall take up some honest work such as has been proposed to me. It is better for him to live an obscure life, doing his daily round of duty, than continue to exercise his brain in idleness, sucking in with worldly knowledge the poison of doubt. I thank you for your offer, Mr. Ventrey, and refuse it."

Mr. Ventrey lay in his chair, a prey to his infirmity. His eyes flashed beneath the thick white brows, but his lips smiled. "Ah," he said, lightly. "You have the advantage of me in being able to stand and thunder forth your refusal. But I think, my friend, it is a little ungenerous to adopt that attitude towards an old man whose limbs are powerless."

John Baldock sat down again awkwardly.

"You are a man of honest but very mistaken views," said the Squire, evenly. "And you are not the kind of man with whom it is possible to argue. I shall not attempt to do so. You have thrown the gage. I accept it. I give you fair warning of my intention. I think it is a shameful thing that you should seek to impose your own limited outlook on a nature prepared for all good and high purposes. I shall resist your attempt to do so."

"You mean, I suppose," said the other quietly, "that you will try to influence my own son to turn away from me."

“I mean that I shall point out to him where I think you are mistaken. I shall ask him to exercise his own reason, as he has already done, and resisted your will where it was obviously to his soul’s harm to acquiesce in it. He is of an age to decide such matters as these for himself, and you are wrong in assuming unreasoning authority over him. If you are wise you will accept his decision. Otherwise, you will be repelling him in a way which I should be sorry to see him repelled from his father.”

John Baldock rose again. “These are idle words, Mr. Ventrey,” he said, with some dignity. “The effect of your intention is plain. I have nothing to say in answer to your threat, except that I shall do my best, God helping me, to retain my hold over my son’s affections, and to advise him as I may be guided. I will wish you good-afternoon.” And he went out without any other form of leave-taking.

He walked home trying to bring his thoughts and passions into subjection, for his passions had been unduly exercised by his late interview. The beauties of a mellow autumn afternoon brooding over the fair scenes amongst which his life and labours were spent did little to soothe him. He was not under the sway of such influences. He walked with his eyes downcast, intent upon the thoughts within him. With all the waywardness of the fanatic, impelled now in one direction, now in another, by the power of an idea he is unable or unwilling to adjust to a consistent course, he was now all eager to push his son at once into the path he had rejected for him that morning. It would be the saving of him from the demoralizing attentions of the Squire, whom he now considered as having thrown off his mask of goodness, and as having shown himself in all the

hideous guise of the tempter. Whatever happened, he would forbid his son to have further dealings with a man of such dangerous ascendancy. And he would make it very clear that under no conditions would he permit him to accept the offer that had been made on his behalf. He did not stop to consider the generosity of that offer. It was enough for him that it had been made by one whom he now profoundly distrusted. No doubt it had some unworthy, undisclosed purpose. It remained in his mind only to be determinedly rejected. The money that was required for Richard's entry into Meaking's business should be found somehow. He did not see at the moment whence it was to come, but that did not trouble him. It was God's wish that Richard should be shut up into this engagement as in an ark of refuge, and the money would be provided. No trace of the suspicion he had shown of the offer in the morning remained. Everything was now taken for granted. The wisdom of having an examination of the state and prospects of the business in which money was to be invested did not even occur to him. If he had been able to do so, he would have sent Meaking a cheque for one hundred and fifty pounds the moment he reached home, and closed the bargain.

He met Richard in the garden and ordered him peremptorily into his study.

"Has Mr. Ventrey told you of the proposal he has made to me—that he should pay your expenses at Oxford?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Richard.

"Then why didn't you tell me of it?"

"Mr. Ventrey asked me not to for the present."

"And you think it is right that you should be asked to hide things from your father, and that you should consent to do it?"

"I went up to the Hall this morning to tell him that I wanted to talk to you about it. I didn't want to keep anything from you, but, really, father—I must say it—you have been so unreasonable and harsh with me lately that I haven't had much inclination to consult you."

"You are forgetting the respect due to me."

"I don't want to. But how am I to act? You told me yourself that you washed your hands of me, and that I could do what I liked. When I brought you Meaking's proposal, you wouldn't hear of it, and you treated him this morning in such a way as to make him feel very sore. You don't help me. You don't help me in the least. You only show anger at whatever I say or do."

He spoke with considerable impatience, and John Baldock was not the man to allow impatience of speech from anybody but himself.

"I will not have you twisting my words and actions to excuse your own insubordination," he said. "Meaking's proposal had to be considered, and it is childish of him and impertinent of you to take exception to my way of doing so. I have now considered it, and I shall accept it. It is a good opening for you, and will give you something to do at once."

"If you had said that yesterday, father, or showed that you might come to say it, I should have been very pleased. But Mr. Ventrey has shown me that I ought not to lose any chances of doing better work than I could do as a bookseller, and he has made me a very generous offer which I have accepted."

John Baldock's face became dark with anger. "You have accepted!" he exclaimed, contemptuously. "A pretty thing, indeed, if a boy of eighteen is to be allowed to set himself against his father's wishes and

arrange his actions according to the pleasure of a stranger."

"Mr. Ventrey is not a stranger. He has shown me the greatest kindness for years, and his advice has always been ready for me when I couldn't get advice from you."

"You could always get advice from me when you approached me in the proper spirit. Mr. Ventrey has acquired a most ruinous influence over you. I put it down to him that you have so obstinately set your will against mine in the matter of taking Orders. But that is over now. I have no wish to reopen the question. You have persisted in your rejection of guidance, and the result must be upon your own head. But I insist with the whole force of my authority that you shall not imperil your soul's health further. I now look upon a residence at Oxford, in the circumstances under which you would obtain it, as the worst possible thing for you. I am pretty certain that you would be idle and would become greatly demoralized."

"I should not be idle," Richard broke in. "Mr. Ventrey warned me against that himself. Unless I go to Oxford to learn, he thinks too that it would not be a good thing. And if I do go, I am determined to work hard and do my very best."

"If you go! You are not going, I tell you. My opposition would not be in the least removed if I were assured that you would work your hardest. As Mr. Ventrey's beneficiary you would follow out his views as to your education, and they would not be on religious lines, not even Christian lines. Mr. Ventrey has shown himself in his true colours to me. He is not a Christian man. He makes no pretence of being so, or even of treating the views of a Christian with respect. I will

have no more dallying with infidelity. I command you to break off your intimacy with Mr. Ventrey. You are to have nothing more to say or to do with him."

Richard's face became set. It bore a look that ought never to have been seen upon it, and never would have been seen but for his father's unwisdom in dealing with him. "I shall not obey a command of that sort," he said.

John Baldock habitually used his heaviest guns when excited over the most ordinary question, and had no reserve of surprise and indignation to draw on, confronted with this revolutionary attitude. "You will not obey me!" he exclaimed, ineffectively.

"No. If you had forbidden me to have anything to do with Mr. Ventrey when he first came here, it might have been different. But I have had years of kindness from him, and he has always treated me as a real friend. You had nothing to say against it all that time. I haven't got many friends, and I am not going to turn my back on one of the best of them."

John Baldock was tempted again to say that he washed his hands of his son. But he had already said it once, without actually meaning it, and felt that the threat would be inadequate. He had no wish to wash his hands of Richard. He wanted to force him to his will. He saw now that he could not do so. His son was too old and too self-reliant to be forced, and he himself was not strong enough to use the necessary pressure. He realized something of this as he sat at his desk opposite to Richard with his face and lips set. But the matter was too near his heart to cause him to hesitate. At the moment of defeat his true strength asserted itself. He loved his son, and he was assured that it was his duty to save from a great peril. He

dropped his hectoring manner on the instant, and took another tone.

"Your obstinacy is causing me great pain, Richard," he said quietly. "You put yourself into conflict with me, but you cannot be happy in doing so. You know that I have only your welfare at heart. Believe me, that the course you are bent on pursuing will turn out disastrously for you. You were all eagerness a very short time ago to embrace this opportunity that young Meaking has provided for you. Perhaps I was over hasty in rejecting it at the time. Yes, I did reject it. I still had hopes that you would see your way to following my long-cherished plans for you. I have buried that wish now. But I still long to see you a good, humble-living man, and I believe that your best chance of becoming so will be for you to take up this work that has been provided close at hand for you. Why cannot you follow your first inclination and do so? I will make any sacrifice to help you. We need not be parted, and can live together until it pleases God to take me from the scene of my labours, getting, I trust, to know and respect each other better as the quiet years go by."

Richard was touched by this appeal, as he was always touched when his father became reasonable and human. And there is no doubt that the sudden removal of the difficulties in the way of his joining Meaking at once weighed with him. That prospect still had power to charm him, in spite of the cold water that the Squire had thrown on it. But there were other considerations.

"I can't promise to give up my friendship with Mr. Ventrey," he said. His tone was decisive, but his face was softened.

"Can you not trust me to judge?" asked his father.

"I tell you in all seriousness that Mr. Ventrey's influence is of evil, not of good."

"I don't think so. He has helped me a great deal—in many ways. I cannot possibly promise to give him up."

John Baldock thought for a moment. His anger had disappeared. He was all reasonableness, both of intention and manner.

"Perhaps it would not be possible for you to do so entirely," he said.

"I can't make any difference at all," replied Richard promptly. "I am old enough now to choose my own friends."

John Baldock thought again. There was nothing for it but to give way on this point. But he reflected that if he gained his chief desire, his son would still be with him and under his watchful care. God helping him, he would exercise that care wisely. His mind cleared.

"My dear boy," he said, "you shall do as you wish about it. But you must not forget that your chief friend ought to be your father, who desires nothing more than that you should rely on him for what help and guidance he can give you."

Richard's mood melted. "Oh, father," he said, "I never do forget it when you talk to me like that. But you have given me so little help lately."

"Let us start again, then. How do you stand with Mr. Ventrey as to his offer? Have you actually pledged yourself to accept it?"

"Yes. No. I don't know that I have actually pledged myself. I should not mind telling Mr. Ventrey that I found I could not accept his offer, if—if I decided not to do so. But I must think it over, father—

quietly by myself. I can't say one thing and then another at a moment's notice."

"Well, then, Richard, think it over. But do not say anything either to yourself or to Mr. Ventrey until you have talked with me again. Will you promise me that?"

"Yes, I will."

"Then God guide you aright, my boy. I leave the matter in His hands."

So Richard was again thrown into doubt, and again went out to take counsel with himself on a problem of ever-increasing difficulty.

CHAPTER XXVII

A NEW LIGHT

It was the morning after Richard's interview with his father. He had come to no new decision. His brain and his will were tired. He had only to set himself to weigh once again the alternate courses he had before him to feel a sort of heavy languor descending on his mind, through which no clear determination could pierce. He felt incapable of judging between the convictions of his father and those of the Squire, incapable even of disengaging his own desires from the confusion of purpose to which he had been brought. It was more in idleness of mind than from a wish for further enlightenment that he had saddled his horse and ridden over to Storbridge to see Meaking.

Meaking was busy in the smaller of the two shops, and Richard found him there alone. His friend did not greet him with his usual cordiality. He looked worried and put out.

"Well," he said, "I suppose I'm beaten. You are going to Oxford to be turned into a fine gentleman. And you are going to chuck away everything that I could have done for you."

"I don't know," Richard replied. "I can't make up my mind. I don't even know which I should like best."

"I know well enough," said Meaking. "You'd like this best. You'd be interested every hour of the day. And you'd feel you were doing something. You'd be a man. You might begin being a man to-morrow if you

liked. But you are not going to be. You are going to be a schoolboy for another five years or so. Very jolly, no doubt. I dare say you'll have a rare good time. I wouldn't change places with you all the same."

"I should work, you know," said Dick, a little put out by his friend's contemptuous tone.

"No, you wouldn't work," answered Meaking. "At least not to any purpose. It isn't your line. That's where Mr. Ventrey makes his mistake. I've been thinking over the situation during the night, and I've got the hang of it. If Mr. Ventrey saw as clearly as I do what'll be the outcome of it, he'd take back his offer. I dare say you'll do a good deal of what they call work at Oxford, the same as you do now at school, and I dare say you'll pass your examinations very well. That'll be the end of it. When you've finished your time at Oxford you'll stand just where you are now, except that you'll have rubbed up against a few more people and learnt something in that way. You're not the sort to learn much from books. As sure as I stand here, when you've finished with Oxford, however hard you work, Mr. Ventrey will be disappointed in you, and you'll be disappointed in yourself. I can't warn Mr. Ventrey. He's too big a man to talk to, and means that I shall know it. But I *have* warned you and I warn you again. You've had just exactly as much education out of books as you can do with, and you're ripe to begin work at something real. Go on trying to learn out of books and you'll only go forward in time. In no other way. You'll begin your life five years from now over again disappointed in yourself, and that's the worst sort of start you can have. You bear in mind what I say and remember it when you leave Oxford."

"I think you're rather hard on me, John," said

Richard, somewhat dejectedly. "You know I'd like to join you—and as a matter of fact father wants me to, now. But it is a difficult thing to make up one's mind to throw over the chances that Mr. Ventrey has offered me, especially after what he has said about it. And you know how I've always looked forward to going to Oxford."

"Yes, I *do* know. And your reason for wanting to go now is the same as it's always been, only you deceive yourself about it. If you could get the advantages that Mr. Ventrey thinks you will get by going and studying at Manchester or Liverpool you wouldn't look twice at his offer. You want to go to Oxford. Why? Because of the romance of the life there. I'll tell you this, no romance of that sort lasts longer than a few weeks, wherever you are. When you have been at Oxford a term it will be just as ordinary and humdrum to you as Storbridge is. You'll go on enjoying life, I dare say, but you won't enjoy it as much as you think you will."

"I wish I knew what to say," said Richard, irresolutely.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Meaking, his eyes flashing. "I wish I could bring it home to you—how you'd enjoy the work you'd have to do here, and the enterprise of getting on, and all of it. You would not want to know what to say for long. And you say your father has come round? Well, I won't say anything more about it. I should get carried out of myself. You must decide on your own account. But there—I dare say you are pretty well decided already. Yes, sir, what can I do for you?"

A customer had come into the shop, a young man in smart yachting costume, a good-looking, dark young

man with a calm air of self-possession, not to say authority. Richard turned round at Meaking's words, and recognized Laurence Syde.

The recognition was mutual. "Hullo, Baldock," said Laurence in a tone that showed no surprise and little pleasure. "Who'd have thought of finding you in this dead and alive hole? How are you?"

They shook hands. Richard had cause to remember his acquaintanceship with Laurence with very little gratification. He had grown old enough during the five years that had elapsed since they had met to gauge accurately the part his one-time companion had played in the disgrace which had befallen him with his aunt. But he was carried away by the other's assurance, and replied without stiffness that his home was not far off, and asked Laurence in return how he came to be at Storbridge.

"We are at Cowes," said Laurence. "Lady Syde thought she'd like to have a look at the forest. We're staying here for lunch. I thought I'd see if I could get hold of something to read. Have you got any good new sporting novels?" he asked, turning to Meaking. "Nothing newer than 'Handley Cross,'" replied Meaking. "There's not much sale for sporting novels in these parts."

"I don't suppose there is," said Laurence. "It seems about as lively as a graveyard. I don't want to buy Jorrocks, thanks. Come on, Baldock, you'd better come and see her ladyship. She's at the 'King's Head,' resting. Better come to lunch. She'll be pleased to see you."

Richard hardly knew what to say. He did not suppose that his aunt, whom he recognized with difficulty under her new name, would be particularly pleased to

see him, but Laurence seemed to take it for granted that he would do as he was asked, and walked out of the shop quite in his old authoritative manner, evidently expecting that Richard would follow him, which he did, having first murmured to Meaking a promise to return.

"What are you doing now?" Laurence asked him, as they walked up the cobbled street together, to outward appearance an ill-assorted pair, the one in his well-cut suit of dark serge, the other in rough ill-fitting country-made clothes. "Gone to Oxford yet?"

"No, I shouldn't go anyhow for another year," replied Richard. "I'm at school."

"What, at Rugby?"

"No, at the Grammar School here at Storbridge. I live at home and ride over every day in term time."

"Still great on horses, eh? That's one thing you *could* do—ride. My father said you had the best seat on a pony of any boy he'd ever seen."

Richard remembered that Sir Franklin had never seen him on a pony, although he had promised to ride with him, and took the easy compliment for what it was worth.

"I'm not so much behind you there as I was," Laurence went on. "I'm reckoned a pretty good man on a horse at Cambridge. Of course I've hunted a lot since I saw you. I shall be Master of the Drag next term: if it'll run to it, that is. I'm pretty hard up, but I dare say I shall be able to get——" He pulled himself up. It was obvious what he expected to be able to get, and from whom. "Why don't you come up to Cambridge?" he went on, a little hastily. "It's a better place than Oxford. They let you alone more—at least they do at the Hall. What college are you going to at Oxford?"

Richard felt no inclination to explain how matters stood with him. "I don't know," he said. "It depends on scholarships, probably. I should like to go to University College. My father was there."

"Well, it's an overrated place. I don't mean Univ., or Oxford particularly. Both of 'em. I'm only going to stay up another two terms. I shouldn't come down now if it weren't for the Drag. I've had enough of it."

"Aren't you going to take a degree?"

"What's the good of a degree to me? I should be very sorry to have to stay up for three years for the sake of one. I liked it at first all right, although I always hated the rules, what there are of them. But, as I say, they don't trouble you much at the Hall."

"Is that Trinity Hall? Have you got rooms in college?"

"No, thank you. Never go near the place if I can help it. You're much freer in lodgings."

"Don't you have to dine there?"

"No. You've got to pay for your dinner a certain number of days in the week, but you needn't eat it, thank goodness. I tried it once when I first went up. Never again."

"What do you do, then?"

"You can have your dinner sent in to your rooms from the college kitchens. They don't cook badly. And, of course, you have your own wine. They don't allow you to drink wine at all in Hall."

"It's rather lonely, isn't it?"

"Lonely? Well, I never heard it called that before. You don't suppose we dine in solitary grandeur, do you? There's somebody giving a dinner every night of the week, and if there isn't you give one yourself. I'm not sure the dinners aren't the best part of the

whole show. The amount of champagne we manage to consume in the course of a term would—would—well, it'd float a 'bus. And it doesn't exactly depress us either. The hilarity of the proceedings is sometimes excessive. But after all it isn't necessary to go to the University to drink enough champagne to make you merry. That's why I'm getting tired of the place. Everything you do to amuse yourself there you can do just as well out of it, and you aren't always liable to be knocking up against a proctor or a don of some sort, or having differences of opinion over quite innocent little enjoyments. I'm going into the Guards, you know. I shall be quite ready for it when I've had my season with the Drag. I shall have had quite as much of Cambridge as I can do with."

This picture of University life, so different from anything he had ever pictured, surprised Richard not a little. "Don't you do any work?" he asked.

"Not more than I'm obliged," replied Laurence. "And that isn't much. I don't know anybody that does. Here we are."

They had come to the doorway of the old inn that graced the marketplace of Storbridge. Laurence led the way into a small sitting-room, where Lady Syde, formerly Mrs. Moggeridge, was reclining on a sofa, reading the *Morning Post*. It had not been his aunt's custom to recline on sofas, or to recline anywhere during the daytime when Richard had last seen her. But she looked older, rather thinner, and as if she had lost something of her earlier vigour. She was as elaborately dressed as ever, and was still a handsome woman, with her beautifully braided iron-grey hair and her neat upright figure. There was no languor in her movements as she rose from the sofa upon recognizing her

nephew, and her greeting was as cordial as if they had recently parted the best of friends.

"My dear boy," she said, "how you have grown! And what a pleasure to see you again! It takes me back to the old days. Give me a kiss, if you do not think yourself too grown up. Ah, that is right. You are the same, but altered. I knew you in a moment. But you have grown like your dear mother. I can see the likeness plainly. You will lunch with us, of course, and you can tell me what you are doing, and intend to do."

Richard was rather overcome by her warmth of manner, obviously sincere for the moment, but probably with no deep root in her feeling. He could not forget, though she seemed to have done so, that she had treated him with the most inequitable disfavour when he had last seen her, and that she had shown no interest of any sort in him or his welfare during the five years that had elapsed since that meeting. He had to remind himself that her present cordiality was for the moment only, before he could feel at ease in her presence. When he had done so he was prepared to take her as she showed herself, but still remained un-aggressively on his guard.

But, by the time the meal was over, he had almost entirely relinquished his watchfulness and was surprised to find himself feeling something very like affection towards his aunt. There was no doubt that she was pleased to see him. Her manner was of the kindest, and her eyes turned to him constantly with a soft and almost wistful look. Her attitude towards Laurence, who chatted easily when the conversation was such as he could join in, and sat as easily silent when his step-mother talked to Richard about her recollections of his

home and his mother, as she did, returning to the subject again and again, was not the pleased, admiring one that it had been when he and Richard were boys together at Paradine Park. It was not unfriendly, for she talked and laughed with him without any apparent reserve, but there was certainly no sign of admiration in her manner, and none of fondness; she seemed to accept him as part of her surroundings, but to have lost her particular interest in him. It was Richard who now engaged her attention, and aroused the warmth in her manner.

Towards the end of the meal she suddenly formed the idea of driving over to Beechurst, and, having formed it, followed it with characteristic determination. "I should like to see where my dear sister is laid to rest," she said, "and the house where she lived and died, sweet, unselfish soul. The evenings are long; there will be plenty of time."

"The launch was to meet us at five o'clock at Lympsford," Laurence reminded her.

"The launch can be sent back for me later," she said. "You can go, Laurence, and give the orders."

"I doubt if there will be time," returned Laurence. "It takes pretty well an hour each way. It wouldn't be back to take you off much before seven, and the Duke of Belfast is coming to dine, you know, and some other men. You won't have time to dress."

"Then, perhaps, you had better keep the launch till six o'clock. I ought to be back by then, and if not it can wait a little longer."

"Am I to kick my heels round Lympsford until six o'clock or later?" asked Laurence.

"I dare say you will find something to amuse you,"

she replied, imperturbably. "But no. Go to the yacht and send the launch back for me. There are no women coming. I will leave your father to entertain the duke and the other men."

"I don't think he'll like it, you know," said Laurence.

It did not appear that Lady Syde had yet come to live in fear of her husband, for this warning did not affect her decision or her manner.

"That is what I wish," she said. "You can take our carriage back, and Richard will order me another from here. A carriage with two horses, please, Richard, so that I can drive straight back from Beechurst to Lympsford. And as soon as possible. Laurence, you may settle up for the luncheon here and for the other carriage. Here are two sovereigns. That ought to be enough."

Laurence pocketed the money, and went out with Richard. "I say, you're in high favour," he said, as they went round to the stable-yard. "If you play your cards well you'll cut me out altogether. There was a row at the end of last term over the bills, and we're not quite over the effects of it yet. You'll have about four hours to bring her round."

The cynicism of the speech, and still more of its manner, angered Richard, and disengaged his real opinion of his companion from the wrappings of complacency which had obscured it. He found his tongue. "I've no wish to cut you or anybody out," he said. "I should be ashamed to toady a woman for the sake of her money. You needn't be afraid of me. You're welcome to all you can screw out of her as far as I'm concerned."

Laurence stopped short and looked at him. His face was hot and his eyes angry. "Do you know what

you're saying?" he said. Richard stopped, too, and met his look squarely.

"Yes, very well," he replied. "I'm not the fool I was five years ago."

Laurence mastered his anger, and walked on. "I've only your word for it," he said, insolently. "You don't seem to be any more of a gentleman, anyhow."

"I hope I'm not, if being a gentleman only means dressing well and getting drunk and spending other people's money," retorted Richard. "Those seem to be about the only things you're proud of."

Laurence turned round on him again. "I've had enough of this," he said, wrathfully. "Who are you, you ill-conditioned young clodhopper to talk to me in that way?"

"I'm my aunt's nephew, for one thing," answered Richard, "whom you got turned out of her house by a dirty trick that I didn't see at the time, because you were afraid I should interfere with your precious schemes."

"Still sore at not getting hold of her money?" sneered Laurence. "I'll tell her what you're really thinking of all the time. She'll be interested."

"You can tell her what you like. I don't want anything from her. You can't do me any harm."

"I shan't do you any good, you may bet your life on that. You'd better make the most of your opportunity this afternoon, for you won't get another."

With which he turned his back, and walked disdainfully away.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE END OF THE MATTER

THE effect on Richard's mind of his altercation with Laurence amounted almost to exhilaration. He had made a discovery about himself, which was that superiority of air, appearance, station, in spite of his readiness to yield to its implied claims in matters of little moment, weighed not a jot with him against the character that lay beneath it. He did not say as much as this to himself, nor did he look at it in the light of a discovery. But he felt none of that after-discomfort which is experienced by one who has expressed himself too freely to another having claims on his deference. Richard felt no deference toward Laurence, no respect for anything that he was or anything that he had. He despised him heartily, and was relieved at having been moved to show it plainly. He did not realize that in his hasty indignation he had probably given a false impression of his own attitude towards him. Laurence would, no doubt, think that he had been brooding on the wrong that had been done him with regard to his aunt, and that he had spoken out of the pent-up soreness of five years. But he did not mind this in the least. It was not true, and it was enough that he himself knew it to be untrue. Laurence might think what he pleased; Sir Franklin Syde, who would no doubt be told of what had happened, might think what he pleased. His aunt—well, his aunt was rather different. She had behaved with genuine friendliness towards him, and he would be sorry if

she should be brought again to do him an injustice. But her friendliness had been proved so unstable, and her claims on his consideration were so slight, that an additional injustice would not count for much. At any rate, he expected and wanted nothing from her in the way of material bounty, was independent of her, owed her nothing. Yes, she also might think what she pleased. No disquieting thoughts would trouble his pillow if she once more withdrew her favour, and he were never to see her again.

Having gone thus far, he went a little farther. He would preserve his complete independence against his aunt. He had gauged her well enough to be aware that it was very likely that in her present mood she would offer her patronage to him again in some way. He wanted no more of it, with its sense of obligation and probable humiliation. He had got on very well without her help so far, and he would go on without it to the end of the chapter. He was willing to forget the injustice she had done him, as she seemed to have done so. He *had* forgotten it until she had crossed his path again. But he would not willingly put himself into a position in which he might have to undergo it again.

These thoughts passed through his mind as they drove together on their way to Beechurst. His aunt was unusually silent until they had covered a mile or more of their journey, and by the time she spoke to him he had put himself on the defensive against her.

"Now tell me," she said, "what you are going to do when you leave school. I suppose you will not be there much longer. Are you going to follow your father's example, and become a clergyman?"

"No," said Richard. "Father wanted me to, but I didn't see my way to it."

"I am rather sorry for that. It is a quiet, peaceful life—a country clergyman's, I mean. I should think in a town it must be most disagreeable. But in a place like Beechurst. So retired; away from all worry and anxiety. And that charming, restful old house. I have the clearest recollections of it. I should like to think of you settled down to a happy existence in such a place."

Richard did not feel called on to reply.

"But you say you could not see your way," she went on. "Well, of course, there are drawbacks. There is a great deal of promiscuous praying in a clergyman's life with which he cannot always feel in tune. And other, no doubt, irksome duties. Very likely anxieties would enter even such a quiet idyllic spot as Beechurst. What have you decided upon then?"

"Well, it isn't quite decided yet," said Richard. "I have a chance of going to the University, but I have not quite made up my mind about it."

"Oh, don't go to the University," cried Lady Syde. "It is the worst sort of place for a young man. I am sure of it. The temptations are overwhelming. I look upon Cambridge—and I dare say Oxford is as bad—simply as a school of extravagance. I'm sure I don't know what else is taught there. Money is spent like water over one amusement after the other, and each one more extravagant than the last. Debts are piled up to an incredible extent, and of course parents—or those responsible—have to pay them. I do not desire to pry into your father's affairs, but I am sure he cannot have the means to send you to the University."

"Laurence has told me something about the way he amuses himself at Cambridge," said Richard, with a

note of contempt. "His is quite a different life from anything I have ever looked forward to at Oxford for myself. I don't think I should want to live in that sort of way in the least."

"You couldn't help it. It is a sort of vortex into which you are drawn. Laurence is most abominably extravagant—more so than usual with young men—I am quite aware. I don't know that he can be blamed for it under the circumstances—circumstances which you wouldn't understand. But none other of the young men I have met live any other sort of life. None of them ever seem to do any work. How they ever find time to take degrees and wooden spoons and things, as I saw in the Senate House a short time ago, I don't know. And I suppose it is as at Eton, and there are collegers who do the work. Pray do not be persuaded into going to Oxford or Cambridge. But I suppose it is hardly for you to decide. Your father will have made up his mind. I cannot understand him, with his views, countenancing such a thing. He must know. He was at the University himself."

"He certainly didn't live the life there that Laurence describes," said Richard. "But as a matter of fact he doesn't want me to go."

"Then, how——, who——?"

"I have a great friend at Beechurst," Richard explained, "who is very anxious for me to go to Oxford, and will help me there."

"Oh! Who is it?"

"Mr. Ventrey, who lives at Beechurst Hall."

"Harry Ventrey. Of course I know him. He is the queerest of men. A very unsafe guide, I should think, for a young man to follow. But, of course, he is enormously rich. It would not matter to him. It is you I

am thinking of. Surely you will not go against your father's wishes! What does he wish you to do?"

"A bookseller at Storbridge, someone I know very well, has offered me a partnership in his business. He is very enterprising, and no doubt it would be a good thing for me, and I should like the work."

"But, my dear boy, what an opportunity to think of throwing away! That charming old-world place! To live your life quietly there within reach of all this beauty, to have no anxieties, no connection with the tiresome world with all its feverish bustle and worry! I cannot imagine a happier lot. To have to do with books, the most delightful and soothing of companions, what a chance! Pray, pray, do not throw it away."

"You would not look down upon me if I started life as a country bookseller, Aunt Henrietta?" asked Richard, with a view of testing further the curiosities of his aunt's character.

"Look down on you!" she exclaimed. "How can you think it? I should look up to you as a wise man who knew where true happiness was to be found in a peaceful life filled with quiet duties instead of a perpetual round of gaiety and excitement, which, I will warn you very plainly, brings no happiness or satisfaction with it. No, indeed, it would be delightful to me to think of you settled down in that way. I should have liked, myself, to do something for you, something substantial to start you in life. But I cannot do everything I should like, now. Expenses are so heavy that—but there, I need not go into that. Something, at any rate, I probably can do. I will talk to your father."

"Thank you very much, Aunt Henrietta," said Richard, blushing, "but I would rather stand on my own

feet. All I want is an opportunity to work, and that I shall have."

She looked at him sharply. "You do not mind accepting benefits from a stranger," she said, "but you are too proud to be beholden to your own mother's sister."

"Mr. Ventrey isn't a stranger," replied Richard. "And I am not at all sure that I am going to accept the benefits he offers me. If I take up the other work I shall depend from the first upon my own energies."

"Something will have to be paid, I suppose, for you to enter the business?"

"Yes, but very little. The half of it has already come from you, Aunt Henrietta."

"From me? How is that?"

"You were very generous in sending me presents when I was a child. Father has saved all that money for me, and it will help me towards my start in life—if I take to the bookselling."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Lady Syde. "Little dribblets of money that I had entirely forgotten! And they are enough to do that!" She gave a prodigious sigh. "What a difference between—! No, I mustn't say it here. Well, Richard, I shall talk to your father. You are my godson. I must be allowed to do something for you. I wish very much that I had done more when the opportunity was open to me. One learns one's mistakes as one grows older. But you seem to have done very well without my help. Probably I should have spoilt you. I fear that indulgence does spoil. It certainly does not call forth gratitude. Now I will rest a little, and steep myself in the charm of this lovely forest of yours."

She leaned back in her seat, and her face grew tired.

Richard was left to his thoughts as they drove on through the forest aisles, and they took him back to the difficult problem he had to face. He found that his mind was clearer and that he could look at it from a different point of view. What, after all, was the University life to which he had been so strangely attracted? If it was anything like the picture that Laurence had drawn of it, there was nothing to attract anybody who regarded it as an opportunity for learning; very little, indeed, that was attractive of it was only to be regarded as an opportunity for social intercourse. Richard's ideas of the work he would do at Oxford were far more imperfectly formed than Mr. Ventrey had allowed for, but his ideas of the social life of college and University were clearly formed, and had nothing in common with the life described by Laurence. If it was really like that!—but he knew that it would not be in his case. Still, even if you took out the dining and the drinking, the extravagance and the idleness, was it worth while to spend three or four years in pleasurable intercourse with men of his own age and tastes if it meant giving up the instant participation in activities which he knew would bring him interest and contentment? His association with men of stronger views and greater experience than his own helped him to weigh the matter carefully. He was not carried away by his own immediate desires, as is the manner of youth. But he was under the sway of impressions, and those made on him by what Laurence and his aunt, and, in a less degree, by what Meaking had said, influenced him more than he knew. The glamour which his mind had thrown over the ordinary life of the undergraduate had been disturbed, and the hold of Oxford over his imagination was weakened.

And a word that his aunt had let drop raised another train of thought. He would have definitely refused to accept her bounty if it had been she who offered him what he had been prepared to accept from Mr. Ventrey. He had told her that he preferred to stand on his own feet. But if he went to Oxford he would not be doing so. He would probably not even be able to stand on his own feet without further help when he had done with the University. Surely his inclinations led him to accept patronage from no one—not even from a friend to whom he would always owe the unpayable debt of gratitude and affection—if he could do without it. And there was no doubt that in this instance he could.

In the mysterious workings of the human mind this phenomenon is apparent, that alongside of a course of inward controversy, where hesitancy reigns over a decision that has to be taken, when the mind needlessly tosses to and fro opposing arguments, and is convinced by none, there has been going on all the time another silent controversy. And, suddenly, the active, conscious, indecisive train of argument is cut across by a clear conviction. The tried victim of doubt wakes to find the matter settled for him, and his whole apparatus of arguments, of statement and counter-statement, can be thrown from him. His soul has spoken, and his mind has nothing to do but to acquiesce. So it is with those who honestly change their religious attitude. So it was with Richard over this smaller problem. By the time the carriage had reached Beechurst his outlook was clear before him. He would take Meaking's offer and set to work at once.

Lady Syde roused herself as the carriage drove in at the gate of the Vicarage and up the shady drive. "Oh, this enchanting spot!" she exclaimed. "How it all

comes back to me!—the beautiful old house and the great trees! That was the window of the room in which she died—nearly twenty years ago. It is sad to think how one changes, here, where so little is changed.”

Old Job Wilding was sweeping the gravel in front of the doorway as they drove up. He drew up his bent figure and looked in surprise at the invasion.

“Why, I declare!” said Lady Syde, in a brighter tone, “there is my old friend Job, looking the same as ever. Well, Job, how do you do?”

A sly look came over Job’s face as he recognized her. “I couldn’t make a change under a month’s notice,” he said, cryptically.

“A month’s notice!” echoed Lady Syde, as she alighted from the carriage. “Why, Job, you are surely not thinking of leaving your present master?”

“I reached the ripe age of seventy year twelve months ago come Michaelmas,” returned Job, “and it’s been in my mind to better myself. Twenty years I’ve been considering of it, owing to a hearty hint received. An’ now I’m to be taken off by a fiery chariot, same as Elijah. But I can’t give less than a month’s notice.” And he turned his back and went off chuckling.

“Queer old creature!” said Lady Syde. “But is he really thinking of leaving? If so, I might be able to——”

“I don’t think he has the least intention of leaving,” said Richard. “Will you come into the drawing-room, Aunt Henrietta; and I will go and tell father you are here? I am not quite sure that he will be in.”

They went into the drawing-room, now entirely disused. Richard unfastened the shutters, and let in the light on its faded emptiness.

“What a sweet, quiet old room,” said Lady Syde.

"How charming one might make it! One would clear out all this terrible modern furniture and fill it with beautiful old things. The framework of the room is perfect. One can only be thankful that it has escaped desecration. Leave me here, Richard, and ask your father to come to me."

Richard found his father about to set out on his parish visits.

"Aunt Henrietta is in the drawing-room, and wants to see you," he said.

"Who!" cried John Baldock, in amazement.

"Aunt Henrietta. I met her in Storbridge and she drove here with me."

The Vicar put down his Bible and the bundle of tracts he was carrying, and left the room.

"Henrietta!" he exclaimed to himself, as he went up the stairs and along the passage leading to the drawing-room. "What can she want here?"

She wanted apparently more than he was prepared to give her, as he found when he had entered the room in which she was sitting by the window, and shut the door behind him. She held out her hand to him, as if no antagonism had ever existed between them, and said:—

"Ah, John. It is years since we met, and perhaps we were not always the best of friends, but there is no need to remember that now."

John Baldock ignored the outstretched hand.

"I should find it impossible to forget it," he said, with a dark look. "I came to your house five years ago, and was flouted and jeered at. I should have been turned out with ignominy if it had not been my own pleasure to depart. You come now into my house, and expect me to welcome you. I cannot do it."

"Now, my dear John," she replied with her old decisive intonation. "How senseless it is to bring up old, forgotten, and, no doubt at the time, unpleasant scenes. As the worldly woman you no doubt think me, I have forgotten them long since. Surely you, as a clergyman, can hardly do less. Why brood on the past?"

"I do not brood on it. But I will not pretend that I am pleased to see you, remembering as I do not only the painful scene to which I refer, but what led up to it."

"Now, what did lead up to it? Tell me, for goodness' sake, and then let us make friends."

"You talk glibly of making friends. Have you forgotten how you turned my son out of your house at a moment's notice, most unjustly, and, after having promised definitely to provide for his education, and in a general way to do far more than that for him, went back upon all your promises, and have shown no sign of interest in him from that day to this."

"Did I do such dreadful things as that?"

"You know very well you did. You had bestowed your favours elsewhere, and cast him off without a moment's compunction. I only hope that you are satisfied with the result of your choice."

"No, my dear John. You do not hope that. You hope that I have been thoroughly well served out. I fear I cannot oblige you with the information you wish. I have the best of husbands and am a very happy woman." She turned her head away towards the window for a moment. "But granted that your version of what occurred is the right one, which I do *not* grant, mind you," she said. "Supposing, rather, that I admit I am apt to let my impulses run away with me and arouse hopes that I do not always thoroughly fulfil,

will you say that Richard has suffered by my action? Do you not think that he is growing up here under your own care to be a better man than he would be if I had showered money and presents on him, and he had learnt to be extravagant and selfish and ungrateful?"

"Thank God," said John Baldock, "that he was spared that."

"Quite so. But he would not have been spared it, I am afraid, if I had made a *protégé* of him. As it is he is a young man whom any father would have the right to be thoroughly proud of. I admire him immensely. I am more pleased with him than I can say. He is a true gentleman. Honest, fearless, courteous, and strong. I could not have brought him up to be that, John. I admit it in sorrow. If I had taken a fancy to him five years ago, was it?—as I wish for my own sake I had done—I should have given him everything I thought he could want to make him happy, and he would have grown up with no thought but to get more. He would not have cared for me one jot, nor for you nor for any one but himself. I think you ought to thank me for saving him from that, and not overwhelm me with reproaches when I only come to you for an hour's peace, and to indulge a few sad but not unhappy memories, before I go away again into the crowded noisy world in which I live."

John Baldock was vanquished, not so much by her words as by the note of appeal on which she ended.

"God knows," he said, "that I would not willingly cherish animosity. The past is over and done with, and perhaps you are right in saying that Richard has not suffered by the injustice with which you undoubtedly treated him. I will say no more. What poor hospitality I can offer you, you are welcome to."

He sat down opposite to her.

"Thank you, John. I can only stay an hour. I should like to go up and see the room in which dear Jessica died, and I should like Richard to take me to her grave. Her memory is still green with me, as I am sure it is with you. But, first of all, I want to have a word with you about Richard. I will not rouse your suspicions again by undertaking great things on his behalf. It might not now be in my power to carry them out. At the same time I am not going away without making him a present. At least, directly I get back to the yacht I shall send you a cheque for a hundred pounds for him. I should like to send more, but at the present time I really cannot afford it."

"Thank you, Henrietta," John Baldock said. "I want no presents, either for myself or for him."

"I am not proposing to give you a present. Richard is my godson, and nothing can prevent me giving him one if I choose to do so. He has told me how carefully you have preserved the odds and ends of money I sent him years ago, and that it may now be turned to good use. You must not deny me the pleasure of adding to the little store. It is small enough, I am ashamed to say; hardly more than my—than many young men would throw away in a day's amusement; but I understand that in his case it may be of real service."

John Baldock's face became eager.

"Has he told you that?" he said.

"Yes. He has told me of the quiet, contented, uneventful life that he is thinking of leading in that delightful old town where I met him. It is very gratifying to me to think that the small sums of money I sent you for him years ago will help towards his settlement, and

if this hundred pounds makes it still easier, I am thankful for it."

"Then he has made up his mind. He will tell me so. I, too, am profoundly thankful. There are those who are trying to tempt him away from my influence, and to——"

"You mean Harry Ventrey. I should hardly think he can be trying to do that. It is not in his line. To be thoroughly satisfied with his cook and get somebody to listen to him talking is all he wants to make him thoroughly happy. But Richard did tell me that he was going to send him to Oxford. I hope he will not do so, because I do not think that the University is a good place to send a boy to."

"But I understood you to say that Richard had made up his mind not to accept his offer."

"I don't know. You must talk to him about it yourself. At any rate, there is the hundred pounds at his service, and if I hear—— But no, I will make no further promises. Now let me go upstairs, and perhaps you will let me have a cup of tea before I set off again."

Lady Syde carried out her programme, and drove away an hour later, expressing herself as soothed in spirit by her visit. She left behind her a far more pleasant impression than she had created on the occasion of her former visits, and even old Sarah, softened by the gift of a golden coin, allowed herself to indulge hopes for her future salvation.

"Now you must write to me and tell me all that you are doing," she said to Richard, as he helped her into the carriage. "And I hope it will not be very long before we meet again."

"Very well, my dear boy," said the Squire, when

Richard informed him of his final decision. "I think you are making a mistake, but your life is your own to make what you can of it. I will adapt myself as quickly as my time of life permits to the new conditions, and shall no doubt have a great deal of advice to offer you as to the best way of selling books. For we shall see each other, I hope, as frequently as ever."

CHAPTER XXIX

TEN YEARS LATER

IN one of the streets about Covent Garden, now much in favour with publishers of books and weekly and monthly periodicals, the wayfarer may come across a ground-floor window filled with an attractive display of books, large and small, but all of them bearing the appearance which would be most likely to tempt the book buyer. The inscription on the window and on the brass plate of the big swing doors which give access into the building is "Meaking and Baldock," and this name also appears on the covers of the books in the window.

In a first-floor room, at the back of the house, Richard Baldock was sitting at a writing-table one evening of late spring some ten years after the events related in the preceding chapters. He was altered in appearance only so much as a boy on the threshold of manhood alters in ten years of a somewhat strenuous life. His fair hair still curled over his forehead, and his blue eyes were honest and clear. His face had lost the brown freckled tint of his boyhood, its lines were stronger, and it bore the index of ten years of absorbing work. But any of his early friends would have recognized him without difficulty, even if they had not seen him during those ten years, and, recognizing him, would have expected the years to roll away when once they heard his voice.

It was six o'clock, and Richard was finishing up his work for the day, when the door opened and his partner came in. John Montague Meaking, for he had now re-asserted his right to the name by which he had been called in his childhood, had not altered in the least either in face or figure, but in outward appearance he had altered immensely. His flaming red hair still shone conspicuously, but it had been brushed and oiled with neatness and did its shining under a silk hat which vied only with his patent leather boots in point of polish. The rest of his habiliments were in keeping with the splendour of his boots and hat, and he looked the picture of prosperity, which was exactly the impression he sought to convey. This change had come about suddenly when the firm had moved to London some four or five years before, and Meaking had blossomed like a butterfly from his chrysalis state of easy, somewhat shabby country clothes into the rigorous but noticeable habit which he now wore. "It's policy," he had said at the time. "Dress like a man of means and you'll be taken for a man of means. That helps credit, and, though we don't want credit just at present, there's no telling when we may. You'd better do the same, Dick. We can't help being young, but we can help being unimportant."

But Richard had lacked the inclination to gain importance by the conspicuousness of his attire. He wore a black coat and a tall hat, and he looked like a gentleman. But he looked like a gentleman who worked.

Meaking threw himself into the easy chair which stood by Richard's desk. "That's a good day's work done," he said. "You nearly finished, Dick? 'Cos if so we'll be off. We've got half an hour to get to the station in, and it takes pretty nearly that."

"I'm ready now," said Richard, locking up the drawer of his writing-table. "What a nuisance it must be having to go all the way to and from your station twice a day."

"It is a nuisance. But it's the only line that gets you out to the Forest. I wouldn't live anywhere else out of London. It isn't as good as our old forest, but it's pleasant enough, especially at this time of the year."

"Yes, it is pleasant. I should like to come and live there too if it weren't for my father."

"It wouldn't be a good thing for you. My work's finished when I've left the office. It doesn't matter where I live. You've got to make a point of meeting people. Don't go forgetting that. You ought to have been at that Hafiz Club dinner to-night, by rights."

"I'd rather come and look at your garden and have a stroll amongst the trees. Come along. I'm ready now."

They went out through the busy outer office in which Meaking lingered a moment to give one or two authoritative orders. Then they made their way to the City terminus and out to the woodland suburb where Meaking resided.

Meaking's residence was a detached villa at the end of a new road, about half a mile from the station, and would have presented no point of attraction to the æsthetic, either outside or in. But it stood in a garden of half an acre, well shaded by trees, and there was nothing between it and the Forest but a few fields. "I shall live here for the seven years of my lease," Meaking had said when he first took it, "and then I shall buy some land and build a house for myself. That is if we do as well as I think we shall."

Five years of Meaking's lease were up, and they were doing at least as well as he had anticipated. He was already spending his leisure time in a tour of inspection, and the acreage he had proposed to himself as the setting of his house had risen from three to twenty.

Mrs. Meaking, now in a blissful state of self-confidence as to her position in life, received them in her drawing-room, and played the well-to-do lady of the house to perfection. No one would have recognized her as the village matron with whom her neighbours had kept up a continuous guerrilla warfare with the object of reducing her proud spirit twenty years before. Probably her sole cause for regret in her present situation was that it could not be beheld by those who had flouted her in the days of her poverty; but there was not one of her Beechurst acquaintances whom she would now have thought a fit and proper person to receive into her house. She would have liked them to know this, but had not succeeded in devising a way by which the knowledge could be conveyed to them.

They dined well. Mrs. Meaking, for all her nonsense, was an excellent housekeeper. And as they dined they talked about old days at Beechurst.

"I think I shall have to run down to Storbridge next week," Meaking said. "Fisher is a good man to have in charge, but I'm not quite satisfied with the way he is running the second-hand department."

"That was bound to go down after Mr. Gannett's death," said Richard. "There wasn't his equal at it in England."

"Who would have thought," said Mrs. Meaking, with the most genteel air, "that that old bag of bones,

if I may be allowed the expression, would have gone on living until he was eighty? There was hardly anything of him left by the time he died."

"Except brains," said Richard.

"Brains and money," corrected Mrs. Meaking. "But the money I attribute to you, Montague. Before you joined him, Mr. Gannett would certainly not have left three thousand pounds."

"He spent nothing on himself," said Meaking. "Hardly as much as a labourer. He was a close old file. Of course I did help him to turn his knowledge to advantage. But he never let on that he knew it. Never a word all the years we worked together."

"He acknowledged it pretty handsomely when he died," said Richard.

"Yes. I don't suppose there's another case of an endowed bookshop in England, or anywhere else. It came in handy for us. There are plenty of good scholars who would like to have Fisher's place. But he's like Mr. Gannett. He thinks more of the books than the trade. I shall have to go down and wake him up every now and then. Would you like to come down with me next week, mother, and look up the old places? We could stay the night and go over to Beechurst on our way back."

"No, thank you, Montague," said Mrs. Meaking, with pursed lips. "I have very few pleasant recollections of Beechurst. The people there are a set of savages, and would only be impertinent if I ventured among them again. They have not the slightest idea how to treat a lady. If I had them here I should know how to deal with them, but go amongst them I will not."

"I shall go over," said Meaking. "I haven't been to Beechurst for five years. It'll do me all the good in

the world to see a bit of the forest again and visit the old haunts. Do you remember that gap in the fence of the Vicarage garden, Dick, by the syringa bush?"

"Yes, I do," said Richard. "But I thought that was my own secret. I didn't know you shared it."

"Of course I did. That's how I used to get in, though I never told you so. It seems like yesterday when we used to go prowling about the shrubbery, playing at Red Indians. What a place it is! None like it. I'll go back and end my days there, as I began them. Don't you feel the same about it, Dick?"

"I do in a way. But it has altered so that I don't feel that I want to go back just yet awhile."

"Altered! It hasn't altered in the least. There's not been a new building put up since you or I can remember, and none pulled down as far as I know."

"The people have altered. It must be quite a different place now?"

"When were you last there?"

"Four years ago, when Mr. Ventrey died."

"Ah, of course you'd miss him. He was a good friend to you."

"He was one of the best I've ever had."

"A real gentleman," put in Mrs. Meaking. "Always a courteous word for everybody, and knew how to treat a lady like a lady. It was a sad end, Mr. Richard."

"Well, I don't know. He was never conscious after his stroke, and died quite quietly. He lived his life fully up to the end. Nobody would have hated more than he to live on with impaired powers, although he had such extraordinary strength of mind that he would have made the best of what was left to him as he had done before. I am glad I was with him at the last, but

I wish he had been able to recognize me, and give me a word."

"You saw him not long before, didn't you?"

"Yes. A fortnight before. I was there for the week-end. It is one of the pleasantest recollections I have of Beechurst. Everything was just as it had been except at the Vicarage, but I was so taken up with Mr. Ventrey and—and with his little granddaughter, that I didn't mind that so much. He was as brilliant as ever, quite like a young, active man, although he was well over seventy, and, of course, quite helpless physically. I never really understood until then how he stood out from other men—at least any other man I have ever known. His talk was wonderful to listen to, and his friendliness and gaiety were beyond description."

"He had quite forgiven you by that time for taking on with me, hadn't he?" asked Meaking.

"He had never said a word except of encouragement after I first told him that I meant to do so. But I think he finally realized that I had been right in my decision. I think he did. He said to me: 'Well, you're making a great success of your work, and it's bringing you into touch with the most intelligent of people. I should think you must be enjoying the best society to be found in London. I, at any rate, think that the society of men of letters is the best.' I remember his words so well because they gave me great pleasure at the time."

"Did he say anything about your not having gone to Oxford when he wanted you to?"

"Not in so many words. But he did say that most young men of my age—I was twenty-four then—were preparing to do something, but that I was doing it. I know he was pleased and interested in all I told him,

and I think he must have seen that I shouldn't have been so well off in any way if I had taken his advice."

"And you don't regret it in any way?"

"I have no reason to. Of course, I should like to have gone to Oxford. I wish I had been there. But the choice lay between that and this, and I am sure I acted wisely. No, I don't regret it."

"Have you seen Miss Ventrey since then?" inquired Mrs. Meaking. "She must be grown up now."

"No. She went to her aunt, Lady Pontypridd, when her grandfather died, and Lady Pontypridd has no great opinion of me. In fact she gave me to understand, when she was at Beechurst at the time of the Squire's death, that a provincial tradesman was no fit companion for her niece, and the less I saw of her for the future the better she would be pleased."

"But you were a London publisher by that time."

"Yes. But she didn't know it, and I didn't enlighten her. I don't see that it makes much difference. It didn't with Mr. Ventrey and it didn't with Lettice. I know she would always be glad to see me, whatever I was. But they went abroad directly after Mr. Ventrey died, and, as far as I know, they have been abroad ever since."

"They are in London now," said Mrs. Meaking, with the air of one to whom the movements of the aristocracy are no secret. "The Dowager Countess of Pontypridd has taken the Honourable Mrs. Pell's house in Curzon Street, and presented her niece, Miss Lettice Ventrey, at Court last week."

"Oh!" said Richard.

"Mother keeps up with these things," said Meaking. "You can't tell her anything about lords and ladies that she don't know."

"I don't know everything, Montague," said Mrs. Meaking, modestly. "It isn't to be expected, in my position, that I should."

"I think I shall brave Lady Pontypridd's scorn and go and call in Curzon Street," said Richard. "Lettice and I were such great friends when she was a child that I am sure she will give me a welcome."

"She is a great heiress," said Mrs. Meaking. "Coming in for all Mr. Ventrey's money, I expect she will be much sought after."

"Mr. Ventrey wasn't as rich as people thought," said Meaking. "He left short of seventy thousand pounds."

"That's not a very small sum," said Richard.

"No. But he was always thought to be a millionaire."

"There is Beechurst Hall," said Mrs. Meaking. "She gets that too."

"Yes. But the property doesn't bring in anything. She'd hardly have enough to live there in the way people live now."

"I don't think Lettice would want to live very extravagantly," said Richard, "unless she has entirely changed. She always liked best to be out of doors. What happy times we used to have together in the forest. I think she loved it as much as any of us, and knew as much about it."

"It is not likely that she will live alone at Beechurst Hall," said Mrs. Meaking, authoritatively. "The Countess of Pontypridd will probably be with her until she marries, and I should think it will not be long before that happens with her advantages."

"I suppose not," said Richard, regretfully. "But it is difficult to think of little Lettice married."

"I wonder you have not been to Beechurst Hall to stay with your aunt, Mr. Richard," said Mrs. Meaking. "It was curious that she should take the place, having the connection with it that she did."

Richard made no reply. The memory of his aunt was an uncomfortable one to him. She had sent her promised cheque for a hundred pounds to his father on the evening after her visit to Beechurst, and had written at the same time to Richard himself in an affectionate manner, and asked him to write to her frequently. He had written her two letters, without receiving a reply to either, and he had heard nothing more of her until, on Mr. Ventrey's death, she and Sir Franklin had taken Beechurst Hall on a term of years, and gone to reside there, Paradine Park having been sold and Sir Franklin's place in Yorkshire let. He could only suppose that Laurence had given her a garbled account of their quarrel which she had believed, and that she had once more determined to have nothing more to do with him. He thought of her with pity, not unmixed with contempt. What kind of a woman must she be, so swayed by the impulses of the moment, and so ready to believe evil on the mere word of those whom she must know not to be entirely trustworthy or free from self-interest? He could not lose much by the withdrawal of her affection, but she had been kind to him on that afternoon at Beechurst, had told him of his mother whom his father never mentioned to him, and had been undoubtedly drawn to him. He could not think of their estrangement altogether without regret, although he was too proud to try to remove it.

"And how is your father, Mr. Richard?" inquired Mrs. Meaking. "I ought to have asked after him before."

"He is very well, thank you," replied Richard. "Full of work, of course. But that suits him."

"Stroud End must be a very different parish from Beechurst. The society there is very second rate, is it not?"

Richard laughed. "I don't know," he said. "The question doesn't trouble my father much. I am sure he is happier working among all that crowd of people than he was at Beechurst, where there was little for a man of his energy to occupy himself with. The exchange came as rather a surprise at the time. I had no idea he was thinking of it. But it has turned out well."

"Do you know why I think he made the exchange?" said Meaking.

"There isn't much doubt about it," replied Richard. "Mr. Coles was a college friend of his, and had worn himself out working at Stroud End. When they met, after many years, they talked things over, and my father thought that as he was strong and well he ought to go into a parish where there was hard, uphill work to do, and let Mr. Coles have a rest. That is why they exchanged."

"I don't believe that was the only reason. I believe he couldn't stand being parted from you. You were going up to London at the time, and I believe he had made up his mind to go, too."

Richard's face grew softer. "I know he likes having me with him," he said. "It was fortunate that Mr. Coles and he met just at that time."

"I believe if they hadn't met then he would have fixed it up with somebody else. Don't you remember how angry he was when I suggested that you should come and live with us at Storbridge instead of riding

over every day? He wouldn't hear of it. I can't say that the reasons he gave against it amounted to much. I believe it was simply that he didn't want to lose you. And I believe it was the same reason that made him think of going to London."

"Dear old father," said Richard. "I hope that had something to do with it. But I'm quite sure I shall never hear it from him if it had. I'm very glad that he did come up to London. Nobody valued his goodness and self-sacrifice at Beechurst, but they think a lot of him here. His church is always full, and he is immensely busy. I am quite sure that he is happy in his work. He is far more cheerful than I ever knew him before. He and Dr. Aquinas are carrying on a very downright warfare on the subject of vestments in the local paper, and I think he is getting a lot of enjoyment out of it. He proposes that we shall publish the correspondence in pamphlet form when he has finally done with Dr. Aquinas. He thinks it ought to cause widespread interest."

"Isn't it rather dull for you living in Stroud End, Mr. Richard?" inquired Mrs. Meaking.

"I don't find it so," said Richard. "My work takes up most of my time, you know. And I can get into town to see my friends if I want to, quite easily. I go abroad for a month or so every year, and am often in the country at other times. No, I am quite contented to be with my father for the present."

"We shall have you marrying, one of these days," said Mrs. Meaking, archly. "I often say to Montague that it is not right that both partners in the firm should still remain bachelors."

"Neither Dick nor I have come across Miss Right yet," said Meaking. "When we do we'll let you know,

mother. Let's go and have a stroll, Dick. We've got half an hour of daylight left."

They went out and inspected the garden, in which Meaking took immense pride, rising early every morning to work among his flower beds for an hour, before arraying himself in the modern equivalent to purple and fine linen, thus turning himself from the semi-bucolic into the man of affairs. Then they went out and walked along the tree-bordered road, and penetrated a short way into the twilight woods, talking as intimate friends well satisfied with one another.

"It's a great satisfaction to me to think that all my ideas turned out right as far as you were concerned," said Meaking, when they had discussed for a short time certain schemes which they had in hand. "You couldn't have gone into anything that would have suited you so well as this."

"It suits me admirably," said Richard. "I enjoy the work, and I'm making use of most of my knowledge and most of my tastes. But I shouldn't have made much of it alone. It was you who have always turned my ideas into success, and your own as well."

"Neither of us could have done so well without the other. I saw that from the beginning. It was a bit of a struggle at first, but we've never looked back, have we?"

"Not since we started the Storbridge Editions. That was the turning point. And that was your idea."

"Yes. I'd been working up to it ever since I'd taken on the binding and printing down at Storbridge. Lots of them have done it since, but we were first in the field, and I must say that I don't think anybody has ever done it better. We're well up the ladder now, Dick, and likely to climb still higher. We're well off, too, both of us, and quite likely to get rich. Lor', what an enjoy-

able thing life is! I don't suppose there are many fellows of our age as happy and contented as we are. I don't want anything more than I've got now, except to 'get on still farther. Do you?"

Richard was silent, and they walked on in the growing dusk of the spring evening.

CHAPTER XXX

IN CURZON STREET

RICHARD was sitting at breakfast with his father in the rather dingy dining-room of the vicarage at Stroud End. John Baldock, except for his grey hair, looked a younger man than when we last saw him. He had found his niche in life, was immensely busy with work that made incessant demands upon him, and did not have to be invented in the recesses of his own brain, and found himself at the age of sixty-five absorbed in interests which took him out of himself, and still possessing the energy of a young man in facing his manifold responsibilities. He sometimes asked himself why he had been content to shut himself up for nearly thirty years in a small country parish, when life in the crowded centres of humanity was so much more congenial to him. He had no worldly ambitions, but the thought occasionally crossed his mind that if he had started his clerical work in a town parish he might by this time have risen to a position of authority in the Church. He felt himself capable of filling such a position—even thought that it might have been a good thing for the Church if he had filled it. But these thoughts occurred seldom. As it was, he had greatly extended his sphere of influence, and was prepared to go on working in his big parish of rather mean little suburban streets and houses as long as he had strength to work anywhere.

Richard was reading the *Times*, and his father the *Rock*. The morning on which the *Rock* appeared on his

breakfast table was a happy one for John Baldock, for he had developed into an ardent controversialist, and that journal was frequently favoured with a lengthy exposition of his views. He was now re-reading a letter of a column and a half signed with his name. It looked better in print than it had done in manuscript, and his face was wearing an agreeable expression when the morning letters were brought in. He laid his by the side of his plate and went on with his reading. There was only one for Richard. It was addressed in a feminine hand, and he opened it with some surprise. His look changed to one of pleasure as he glanced at the signature before reading it, and when he had read it once he read it again, still with a smile on his lips. It was from Lettice Ventrey, and was dated the day before from the house in Curzon Street which Mrs. Meaking had stated to be the usual abode of the Honourable Mrs. Pell.

“ Dear Dick (*it ran*)—What ages it is since we last saw each other! I think you must have quite forgotten your old friend. But no, I am sure you haven’t. You must think of the dear days at Beechurst as often as I do, and of the forest, and all the happy times we had there together. I have been in most of the countries of Europe during the last four years, and seem to have been wandering for forty, but my heart is still true to that sweet corner of the world, and I have often longed and longed to be back there, just as we were in the old days with dear grandpapa, so kind and wise, and the beautiful quiet sunny house, and the still more beautiful forest whose secrets we explored together through all the long years of my childhood. I don’t suppose any girl ever had a happier childhood than mine, and you are so mixed up with it that I can’t remember that I am now a young woman supposed to be thinking of nothing but balls and town enjoyments, and that you are, probably,

a grave man who has little time—or inclination—to think of the little girl you did so much to make happy years ago. And yet I am sure that you haven't changed a bit, and will be just as pleased to see me again as I shall to see you. Which brings me to the most important part of my letter. My aunt hopes you will excuse the very short notice, and dine with us to-morrow at a quarter-past eight. We are so busy rushing about day after day and night after night that a free evening is a boon to be seized, and I don't know when we shall have another. So do come if you possibly can, and let us have a good talk over old times. Ever your sincere friend—Lettice Ventrey."

The warm memories awakened by this letter were broken in upon by John Baldock's voice. "You remember that the choirmen are coming to supper to-night, Richard. I hope you have no engagement."

"I have just had a letter from Lettice Ventrey, father," Richard replied. "She is in London with Lady Pontypridd, and they have asked me to dine with them to-night."

"Dear me!" ejaculated John Baldock. "I had forgotten the very existence of Lettice Ventrey. Lady Pontypridd I remember. Not a very agreeable woman, it struck me, although we had some talk on one occasion at Beechurst in which we found we were agreed that the growth of lawlessness in the Church had been greatly accelerated during the last few years. But sound views do not always make for humility, and I recollect Lady Pontypridd as showing more than the usual foolish pride of her class. We are all equal before God, Who bringeth the lofty from their seat and exalteth the humble and meek. But I hope you will not accept this invitation for to-night. It will help me a great deal with the choirmen if you are here to support me. It is

a little difficult to break the ice on these festal occasions, and you would be of the greatest assistance in doing so to-night."

"I am very sorry, father, but if you don't very much mind I think I should like to go. It is so long since I saw Lettice that I am anxious not to miss the opportunity."

"Couldn't you go some other night? The choirmen only come here twice a year, and it is a great occasion for them."

"Lettice says they are so occupied that this is the only night they are likely to have free. I am very sorry to forsake you, but I am afraid you must do without me."

"Well, if you wish to go, I will not stop you. You are very good in giving me your help as a rule on these occasions, and I value it. I must not expect you to relinquish all your leisure time to my interests."

"Thank you, father. I shouldn't cry off to-night if I were not very anxious not to miss this opportunity of seeing Lettice again. You know what friends we were years ago. I haven't seen her for over four years. She'll be altered, of course, but she writes as if she were just the same."

So Richard took a bag up to town, dressed in his office room, and appeared in Curzon Street at the appointed hour.

The house that Lady Pontypridd had rented for the season from the Honourable Mrs. Pell was very small, and, if it had not been in such a highly considered part of the town, might have been said to be a little stuffy. The dining-room, with the passage that gave entrance to the house, occupied the whole of the ground-floor, and even then left much to be desired in point of airi-

ness. The first floor was devoted exclusively to the drawing-room, and when you had accounted for the room sacred to the nightly dreams of Lady Pontypridd, and that assigned to Lettice, it was difficult to imagine where the tall footman who opened the door to Richard, and the decorous butler who preceded him upstairs, and the cook who prepared the dinner which he presently ate, and the kitchen maid who helped her, and the maid who attended to the due care of the house, and the maid who helped Lady Pontypridd attire herself, and the maid who performed the like service for Lettice, could possibly bestow themselves, even supposing that some of their parts were doubled. Lady Pontypridd's dinners, however, were very good, and the wines poured out by the decorous butler not unacceptable to the male palate; and if there was very little space in the house in Curzon Street that Lady Pontypridd had taken from the Honourable Mrs. Pell, there was seldom any lack of people to fill what little space there was.

Richard was shown into a drawing-room bright with gay chintzes and flowers and silver, and having arrived punctually at the hour mentioned in Lettice's note, was left by himself for a considerable time to examine the belongings of Lady Pontypridd and those of the Honourable Mrs. Pell. Among the former was a large photograph in a silver frame of a beautiful girl in train and feathers, and Richard had little difficulty in recognizing, under the unfamiliar guise, the features of Lettice, although the changes that a few years of a girl's life between fourteen and eighteen made in her appearance struck him as astonishing. There was the same sweet confiding smile, the same friendly eyes, the same look of dainty freshness, and his heart tightened a little as the child Lettice, whom he knew so well, gradually

revealed herself in the form of the stately young beauty in all her finery.

Presently Lettice herself came into the room, and she was just the same as she had always been, although, if he had met her by chance in the street, he might not have recognized her at the moment.

"Oh, Dick," she said, "*I am* so glad to see you. You can't think how I have missed you, and the forest and everything. And you haven't altered in the least, except that you have lost your merry freckles. I suppose that is London, and I should have lost mine by this time if I had ever had any."

Her eyes were dewy as she smiled her welcome, and he had the same tightening of the throat that he had felt when he looked at her portrait. "Come and sit down," she said. "I hurried over dressing. Aunt Louisa won't be here for another five minutes. Do you know I haven't been in England for four years? First Dresden, then Paris and Florence and Rome and Pau, and dozens of other places in between. Aunt Louisa used to come home occasionally when she had seen me safely settled for a term's work, wherever I was, but she never brought me. I was to be thoroughly educated before I burst on the scene. And I hope I am thoroughly educated, for I don't want to go through it again. I am as English as I can be, and I simply love to be back again, even if it is only in London."

"And you are going through your season? How do you like it, Lettice? As much as Beechurst and the forest?"

"Oh, no. But I do like it. I'll be quite honest, as grandpapa taught me to be. Do you remember when I fell off the pony and got on again and said I wasn't frightened? I have never forgotten that. He said:

‘If you had said you were frightened, as anybody could have seen for themselves, I should have said you were a plucky little girl to try again. As it is, Filmer had better wheel me indoors, I am no longer interested in your scrambles.’ Dear grandpapa! It brings it all back to me to see you, Dick. What happy times we used to have, didn’t we?”

“Yes, indeed, we did. But still, you like this too?”

“It is great fun. We go dashing about everywhere, morning, noon, and night. There is always something amusing to do or to see. And London is lovely in May, so fresh and bright, with flowers and sunshine everywhere. Don’t you think so?”

“Well, my London is not very full of flowers, or of sunshine. But then mine is the working London. It is quite a different London that is occupied by you butterflies of fashion.”

Lettice laughed. “Am I a butterfly of fashion? I suppose I am. I always said I shouldn’t be, you know, in the old days. We arranged that we would always live in the forest, didn’t we? and never go near a town.”

“Yes. And now we have both come to town—I to work and you to play.”

“But your life isn’t all work, Dick. You must have some playtime. What do you do with it? I have never seen you about anywhere, and I have often looked for you.”

“I don’t spend my playtime where I should be likely to be seen by a young lady of fashion.”

“Don’t you ever go to balls, or the play, or the opera, or anywhere?”

“I don’t go to balls. I do go to a play sometimes, and very occasionally to the opera.”

“Ah, then, you are not such a hermit as you make

yourself out. I think I love the opera more than anything. I am not altogether satisfied with Covent Garden after Dresden, you know, but some of the singers are magnificent, and it is great fun to have a sort of jolly evening party made out of it, instead of going through it all so seriously. Oh, yes, I do love London, Dick. All the people and the gaiety, and everything——”

“And admiration, Lettice?”

She laughed gaily, but not without a little blush. “I have found out that I am a beauty,” she said, looking at him with the most engaging frankness. “I really hadn’t any idea of it. Honestly, I hadn’t. There are so many other things to think about. I can’t pretend to be displeased at the discovery.”

“And when did you make the great discovery?”

“When I was presented. The papers said it first, but a lot of people have mentioned it since. However, I’m not going to talk about it; only you know how I was brought up—never to be afraid of the truth. And it is the truth that I have turned into a pretty girl. Now, isn’t it, Dick?”

“No, it isn’t,” said Richard. “You were always pretty—much more than pretty. You were the only person who didn’t know it.”

“Thank you very much, Dick. Well, I know it now, and, as I say, the discovery has pleased me. Here is auntie.”

Lady Pontypridd, who now sailed into the room under rather heavy canvas, was stouter and whiter than she had been when Richard had last had the pleasure of seeing her, but otherwise unchanged. She was rather more gracious towards himself than she had been, but even while she greeted him with an approach to affabil-

ity, the eye with which she overlooked him was cold, not to say hostile, and he was not able to feel that he had bestowed any real happiness on her by accepting her invitation.

"Dear me," she said, "you have altered a great deal. I hear you are making a great success of your business. Lord Frederic Lacy was telling me the other day that your firm was so highly thought of. He knows a great deal about books and magazines, and so on."

"We are doing very well," said Richard. "We pay a lot of attention to the business."

"That is so wise," said Lady Pontypridd. "You cannot—shall we go in to dinner?—you cannot—we must go down one by one—you cannot really do any good business unless you pay attention to it—mind the loose rug at the bottom of the stairs. But if you do I am quite sure that you can make it a great success, and make money out of it into the bargain."

"I should quite have enjoyed engaging in business myself," pursued Lady Pontypridd, when they had taken their seats at the table. "There must be something quite romantic about walking into the Stock Exchange, and making a thousand pounds by a mere nod."

"Do they do that?" said Lettice. "What lucky people! Why doesn't everybody go on the Stock Exchange?"

"They want a head for it, of course," said Lady Pontypridd, "or they might just as easily lose. But I am sure that I have the head, and should do very well."

"Auntie, dear, I am quite sure you would lose every penny you've got," said Lettice; "you are far too confiding."

Lady Pontypridd ignored this compliment. "Can

you tell me anything about Maritana Gold Mines, Mr. Baldock?" she asked. "I bought a few hundred shares some months ago, on the advice of young George Charing, Lord Otford's boy, who was ploughed for the Army, and is now doing very well in the City. I procured them extraordinarily cheap, as they were one pound shares, and the man who wished to sell them was content to take five and threepence apiece for them. Young Charing arranged that."

"A friend of mine bought some, too," said Richard. "I think you could get them for the odd threepence now."

"Then if I were to sell those I have at present at the price I gave for them, or rather more, and were to buy several thousand shares at a very low price with the proceeds, I suppose I should stand to gain a large sum of money?" said Lady Pontypridd. "That is how things are managed, is it not?"

"Well, I'm afraid not exactly," Richard began, but Lettice broke in. "Don't let's talk about money," she said. "Auntie, you know you have not quite as much as you want. If you go speculating you will only lose it all."

"I should never dream of speculating, Lettice," replied Lady Pontypridd. "But buying and selling a few mining shares or railway shares, or whatever they may be, is a well-known way of making money, and one which well-known people employ. And however rich one may be—not that I am rich, far from it—it is always agreeable to have a little more. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Baldock?"

Richard agreed as far as was necessary to preserve the requisite harmony of the table, but in truth he was paying very little attention to Lady Pontypridd or her

conversation. He was taken up with Lettice, who appeared to him in the light of a revelation. It was not only that she was beautiful, although she was undoubtedly beautiful, with face and hair and eyes to have confounded many a young man not the most impressionable. It was that with all this new and strange and rare beauty, she was still the Lettice he knew so well, the Lettice in whose presence he felt all the old charm of his happiest days, whom he had always loved, and because he had always loved her, whose new beauty revealed itself to him as a subject, not only of admiration, but of pride. Conflicting emotions passed through his mind as he talked to her over the dinner table, and afterwards in the drawing-room by the piano, while Lady Pontypridd read the evening paper, and probably dozed a little. At one moment he seemed to be talking to someone whom he knew so well that her proximity was the most natural thing in the world; at the next he was with a stranger, and he could hardly believe that he had the right to such delightful intimacy. His main feeling was one of bewilderment. It was Lettice, his little friend of the forest, unchanged. It was a lovely girl, moving in bright worlds, with which he could never be familiar. But still it was Lettice, and, again, he kept on saying to himself, unchanged—and yet with a strange, new power, which he should never have expected her to possess, for she could make the little dining-room glow with a radiance that lights and flowers and silver had no power to evoke, and could even throw over the comfortable figure of Lady Pontypridd, sunk in an easy-chair, a glamour which it did not possess of itself.

The evening was not a long one, for Lady Pontypridd and Lettice had their parties to go to, and Rich-

ard was out of the house by eleven o'clock, making his way to his home in the distant suburbs. He carried away with him the remembrance of Lettice's sweet face, the scent of her clothes, the sound of her voice; and the radiance that hung round her, filling the poky little house in Curzon Street, and lapping even Lady Pontypridd with its beams, went with him through the darkness.

Richard's hour had come like a thief in the night. He had always loved Lettice, but the love with which he loved her now was as different from his former love as the poles are far asunder. The whole world was changed for him, and he lay down that night with happiness embracing him like a garment.

CHAPTER XXXI

TROUBLED DAYS

THE gleam of happiness which had struck into Richard's somewhat prosaic life lasted no longer than the night which followed his meeting with Lettice. The morning brought doubts which piled themselves one upon another until his whole sky was overcast by them. He had fallen desperately in love. There was no disguising that fact, which was sufficiently obvious to make it impossible for him to deceive himself as to the quality of his new feeling for Lettice. But the admission that it was so brought him little gratification. He was not a boy to whom the first stages of a passion are so new and delightful that the mind is content to feed on the delicious sensations of the moment and to leave the future unconsidered. His passion for Lettice was as keen as if her beauty and sweetness had been that of a stranger revealed to him suddenly in a flash of what is known as love at first sight. But it was made immeasurably stronger and more lasting by his knowledge of her. He knew that the new and rare graces that had taken him captive by a shock were allied to qualities of mind and character deserving of all devotion, and there could be no doubts, no after thoughts, that in yielding to his love for her he had been carried away by the mere fascination of her beauty.

But he wanted more than to cherish his love for her in his own bosom; much more. He wanted her and all her sweetness and friendliness for his own. He wanted

to declare his love and have it returned. And here he seemed to be met with insuperable difficulties.

These difficulties lay not so much in the difference between his position in the world and hers. She was rich, but he ignored that, as he knew she would ignore it in her frank generosity, supposing there to be no other obstacle to his suit. He was not a needy adventurer pursuing an heiress. He was well off already, and was growing richer every year. There could be no great disparity between them in this respect. And yet, after all, it was the difference in position, if not in wealth, which made his suit appear almost hopeless. She moved in a different world from his. She was surrounded by wealth and rank and luxury, and he was a worker with the fewest possible connections with the world of fashion and leisure in which she was shining now as a bright particular star. His very pride in her forced him to set her high above himself. What chances would he have, an unknown undistinguished young man, to enjoy her favour against those of the many eligible, self-confident suitors, distinguished by birth, wealth, perhaps actual achievements, whose approaches her aunt would take good care should be made easy?

His manhood rose up to encourage him. He wanted her for his own. He loved her and could make her happy. He had a right to try to gain her love, the right of an honest lover, and he would fight for it against those most favoured in externals against himself.

But how was he to fight? The very battle-ground was hedged round with obstacles which he knew not how to surmount. The men whom he pictured to himself as his rivals lived the same life, breathed the same air as she did. They could urge their suit, directly or in-

directly, night and day, while he must remain outside the enchanted ground and see her only at rare intervals. For the simple little fact, which was yet of such importance, obtruded itself upon him: he had not the entrance to the places where she was now to be seen. And, further than that, he knew that if he tried to scale the weak places in the palisades that surrounded her, Lady Pontypridd, whose recent complacency towards himself he priced very low, would use all her energies to strengthen them against him.

Well, the difficulties in front of him were rather mean ones. He would have preferred to have to fight something more serious than the opposition of an ambitious old woman and the exclusiveness of a social clique. But if those were the obstacles that lay between him and the lady of his choice he would surmount them as best he could, and bring to bear upon them the same intrepid constancy which the knights of old had offered to their more formidable enemies.

These considerations did not occur to him all at once, but they pressed upon him hardly when he came to discover what a barrier there was between the daily life of the class to which Lettice belonged, the class which uses London for a few months in the spring and early summer as a city of pleasure, and his own much larger class which lives and works in it all the year round. At first he was fortunate. He called on Lady Pontypridd a few days after he had dined in Curzon Street and found Lettice, by a happy chance, alone. He talked to her for half an hour, and came away more deeply in love with her than ever. She was frankly friendly, more than friendly, and he was fired anew with the hope of winning her. Then he met her at dinner at the house of a Royal Academician, unexpectedly. He

and she were the only young people present, and he had the felicity of sitting next her at the table and almost monopolizing her afterwards. But on this occasion Lady Pontypridd was present, and he saw cold gleams of distrust and aversion chasing each other across that lady's expressive face. The next evening he walked in the Park, met both the ladies, and snatched a few minutes' conversation, but Lady Pontypridd, now roused to action, manœuvred him out of his advantage, and he had the mortification of seeing Lettice surrounded by the butterflies of fashion, towards whom he felt a jealous dislike, and, if the truth were told, completely at home and merry in their company. Then he called again at Curzon Street and underwent a dreadful ten minutes of surface conversation with Lady Pontypridd, who made it quite clear that she was only coldly civil to him because that method of treatment was as likely to show him that he was not wanted there as any other. Lettice did not appear, probably did not know he was in the house, and he left in despair, feeling that if he rang Lady Pontypridd's bell again he would be committing an unpardonable intrusion.

After that, things went from bad to worse. He could never look back afterwards upon the weeks which followed without an uncomfortable shrinking at the thought of the misery he endured. He could settle to nothing, neglected his work, or as much of it as could be neglected, and was for ever haunting the places where he might have a chance of seeing her. His success was not remarkable. Two or three times he received invitations to houses where he hoped to meet her, and, when he was not disappointed in his hope, he had a few words with her. She was always kind to him, but he was too diffident to take advantage of his opportunities, and

he came to think after a time that she was getting a little tired of his modest advances, and was pleased when other acquaintances claimed her attention and elbowed him out. He walked constantly in the Park of an evening and spoke to her sometimes there. But he was so obviously there for that purpose alone, knowing no other soul of all those who sat or walked under the trees, that it was almost torture for him to present himself to her, especially when she was accompanied by Lady Pontypridd, who now made no disguise of her aversion, and even her contempt. He felt humiliated, out of place. His lugubrious face showed his shrinking and could hardly have commended him to the least exacting or adored ladies. Yes, Lettice was always kind to him, but the horrible feeling came over him by and by that she must think him a bore.

Then he determined that he would make no more efforts to see her, since he could not meet her on equal terms, and for a week he led the life he had led for years before this sudden desire had altered his habits. He came regularly to his office from his father's suburban vicarage, did his work, and went back again in the evening. If he dined out it was where he could have no expectation of meeting Lettice, and it cannot be said that he did much to add to the sociability of any meal which he ate in company. He was very unhappy, and his life, hitherto smooth and well ordered, became a procession of meaningless days and nights.

Meaking, of course, noticed the change in him, and questioned him about it in his bluff and not too tactful manner. "I believe you're in love," he said, and laughed a hoarse guffaw.

"You needn't worry about me," said Richard, irritably. "Something has happened to upset me rather,

but I'll keep my private life apart from business, if you don't mind. I do my work here, and——"

"That's just what you don't do," interrupted Meaking. "You get through just what you've got to, but as for using your brain over it—well, another clerk would be as useful in the office as you just now. If you're ill why don't you go away for a bit? You might just as well for all the good you're doing here."

"I'm not ill," snapped Richard. "Please leave me alone."

Meaking looked at him intently. "You've never spoken to me like that before," he said. "I don't want to pry into your private affairs, but you know what I feel towards you. Why don't you tell me what's the matter, and let me help?"

"Thank you very much," said Richard. "You can't help. I shall get over it. I'm sorry I showed annoyance."

Richard had been unhappy enough before, but his wretchedness at the end of this week of self-enforced denial was acute. What he would have done next if left to himself he was not afterwards able to determine. But he was not left to himself. To his intense surprise he received a note from Lady Pontypridd asking him to dine in a few days' time.

What induced Lady Pontypridd to issue this invitation will never be known. Enlightenment cannot now come from her, for she is dead and has left no diaries. Lettice declared afterwards that she had nothing to do with it, and was as surprised as Richard himself. Compunction for her treatment of her brother's and niece's friend it can hardly have been, for Lady Pontypridd was far removed by nature from such feelings. It is more probable that it was the outcome of an im-

pulse of pure contempt for his pretensions and person. The working out of the motive would be somewhat subtle, but for want of a more likely explanation this must serve, at least, as a suggestion.

Hope revived in Richard's breast, and he betook himself once more to the house in Curzon Street. He spent a quarter of an hour alone in the drawing-room, for Lettice did not come down this time to keep him company. But at the end of fifteen minutes he was surprised and also disturbed at the entrance of another guest, and once more after ten years came face to face with Laurence Syde.

Laurence was as handsome a man as he had been a boy. He was dressed, of course, in the very height of the masculine fashion of the day, and bore himself with such an assured air of superiority and self-confidence as he entered the room that Richard felt all the old unhappy sense of contrast revived in his mind the moment he set eyes on him.

Laurence's eyes never wavered as he recognized his one-time antagonist. He did not offer to shake hands, but said in a voice as unmoved as if they had last seen each other the day before, "Hallo! How are you? Devilish cold for the time of year, isn't it?"

The entrance of Lady Pontypridd and Lettice at this moment saved Richard the necessity of a reply. He could not but envy Laurence the possession of qualities which made him, quite apart from what he was or anything he might have done, a man of mark, attracting instant attention and deference, while he himself sank naturally into the background and was made apparently of no account whatever. He thought to himself, during the progress of the meal which followed, that if Lady Pontypridd had asked him and Laurence to the house

together for the express purpose of showing up his own inferiority she could hardly have chosen a more successful method of humiliating him before Lettice. Laurence dominated the conversation, and led it into channels in which it was impossible for him to follow. He had nothing whatever to say, and sat at Lady Pontypridd's table as silent as he had sat at his aunt's years before, when nobody seemed to have anything to say to him or any desire to include him in the conversation. Even Lettice, although she did turn to him occasionally with her charming smile, and address some remark to him, did not appear to be as anxious as she might have been to turn the talk on to a subject in which he might take his part; for when he had answered her she left him alone again, and talked and laughed with Laurence, who for his part ignored Richard completely, as did Lady Pontypridd in what he felt to be the most inhospitable fashion. He felt sore all over, bitterly humiliated. He was angry with every one, even with Lettice, who seemed, every time he saw her, to be drifting farther away from him. He wished a hundred times that he had not come to the house. He was only laying himself open to be despised, accepting a position in which he could not possibly expect to appear to advantage. He told himself that it should be the last time.

He was not made happier by the conviction that presently grew upon him that Laurence was applying himself to the entertainment of Lettice in a way that was more marked than his ordinary manner. His own feelings towards her rendered him susceptible to shades of meaning, and his jealousy sprang into flame as he perceived, was convinced that he perceived, the man whom he now looked upon as his enemy, entering designedly upon the first stages of love-making. His dislike of

Laurence, his contempt for his unscrupulous selfishness and mean outlook on life, prompted him to put the worst construction on the possibilities of such a suit. He would do anything for money, he sneered to himself, and put down Laurence's attempts to ingratiate himself with Lettice as an ignoble pursuit of an heiress, ignoring the charm of his lady and her power to attract the most unworthy of mankind. The fire of his jealousy was fed by his observation of Lettice's reception of Laurence's efforts to please her. She was far from rejecting them. It even seemed to him that she went out of her way to encourage them, and by the time the ladies left the room he was in a smouldering state of anger and misery.

But before that time came they talked of Beechurst.

"How I should love to see the old place again," said Lettice. "All my happiest years were spent there, and I have never been there since my dear grandfather died."

"You must come and stay there," said Laurence. "Lady Pontypridd, you will bring Miss Ventrey down for a week-end, won't you? It is not so very far. Lady Syde loves the place, too, and is always flying off there. She is never happy in one place for long. When she is in London she wants to be in the country, and when she is in the country she longs for the excitements of town."

"I don't know," said Lady Pontypridd. "I am too old to enjoy this modern habit of careering all over England at a few hours' notice. In my day, when we came up to London for the season we stayed there till it was over, and shut up our country houses till we settled down in them again in the autumn."

"But you didn't have motor-cars in those days," said Laurence. "They make everything so easy. You

would leave this house at half-past four and get to Beechurst in plenty of time for dinner. Do let us fix up a week-end."

"Well, perhaps I might make an exception if Lady Syde is kind enough to ask us," said Lady Pontypridd. "Beechurst is a very charming place, and I own I should like to see it again."

"That will be delightful!" cried Lettice. "I should love to spend a day or two in the dear old place. Do you ever go down there now?" she asked, turning to Richard.

"I haven't been there for four or five years," he answered. "Not since my aunt went to live at the Hall."

"Your aunt?" echoed Lady Pontypridd, regarding him with bare tolerance.

"Lady Syde is my aunt," he said.

"You ought to come down and look her up," said Laurence, addressing him for the first time.

Richard made no reply, and presently the ladies left the room.

When the two young men were left to their coffee and cigarettes there was complete silence between them for a time. Richard sat hugging his bitter thoughts, his antagonism towards his companion growing every moment. Laurence sat with his eyes downcast, buried in his thoughts. Apparently his opinion of Richard's importance in the scheme of things was so slight that he was quite at ease in ignoring his presence altogether if his own cogitations interested him enough to make him prefer to indulge in them. But presently he raised his head and said, "Have you been living in London since your father left Beechurst?"

"Yes," said Richard, shortly.

"Why haven't you looked up her ladyship?" pursued

Laurence. "We're in Brook Street. She's generally there at this time of the year."

"I don't flatter myself she would be particularly pleased to see me."

"Why not?"

"I should think you could probably answer that question better than I can. You told me the last time we met that you'd take good care I shouldn't see any more of her, and I supposed you did so."

Laurence gave vent to an impatient exclamation. "Want to have a row again, do you?" he said. "I've never come across a fellow quite so quarrelsome as you. I'm not going to oblige you. I don't care a damn what you think or what you do. We're not likely to meet very often. What you are doing here I don't know."

"It's quite easy to see what you're doing here," retorted Richard, unwisely, out of the bitterness of his heart.

Laurence looked at him with a sneering face, dully red. "I'm going upstairs," he said, rising. "I'm not going to sit at the same table with a cad."

Richard followed him upstairs into the drawing-room, not feeling pleased with himself. The hour which followed did not lighten his dejection. Lettice went to the piano and Laurence followed her at once. Lady Pontypridd acquiesced in this arrangement so far as to keep Richard by her side and talk to him with a greater show of amiability than she had hitherto employed.

"I didn't know that Lady Syde was your aunt," she said. "What is the exact relationship?"

"She was my mother's sister," he replied.

"She is very rich, is she not?"

"I don't know. I see very little of her."

"I always understood that she had no relatives, and that she had made Captain Syde her heir."

Richard looked at the pair by the piano. He would have liked to reply: "I can see that you thought so." but sat silent. Before he left the house he had two minutes' conversation with Lettice, while Laurence addressed himself to his hostess.

"I shan't see you again, Lettice," he said, looking at her with miserable eyes, which yet spoke of a determination taken.

Her face grew serious, but she returned his look. "Why not, Dick?" she said, softly.

"Because I am quite out of place in your world," he said. "You do not respect me for intruding where I am not at home and not wanted. I must go back to my work, and be content with my memories of you. They are very dear to me, and I won't do anything more to spoil them."

Her eyes grew moist. "I can't afford to lose an old friend," she said.

"You are more at home with your new ones," he answered her.

Her face altered and grew proud. "Perhaps you are right," she said, turning away. "You are not the Dick that I used to know."

"If I have altered it is because you have. But you won't be troubled with me any more. Good night."

She gave him her hand coldly, and he went away with a pain at his heart which, he told himself, would never be healed as long as he lived.

Five minutes later Laurence Syde took his leave, after having set arrangements in train for a visit from Lady Pontypridd and Lettice to Beechurst Hall.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE END OF THE STORY

THE little church of Beechurst, plain and undistinguished, stood by itself away from the village on the top of a rise overlooking the parklike slopes towards the Hall and its surrounding forest lands. In a corner of the quiet churchyard, away from the road, grew a giant yew tree, round the bole of which was a wooden seat, seldom used by the villagers, who preferred the more populous spaces near their village homes. In the shade of this yew was the grave of Richard's young mother, and here one afternoon of early summer he came to soothe if he could his constant unhappiness, which had grown no less during the weeks which had elapsed since he had bidden farewell to Lettice.

He had gone down the night before to Storbridge to look after the affairs of his business, and having completed his work that morning had walked out to Beechurst. In his present dejected mood he had kept as far as possible away from the village, with a view to escaping the greetings of the people, nearly every one of whom he had known intimately. He had walked by unfrequented forest tracks, and made his way to his old haunts at the back of the vicarage garden. He had stood on the other side of the fence by the syringa bush, now grown to noble proportions. His old-time gap had been patched up, and the path his feet had worn into the spaciousness of the forest had vanished among the springing grasses. Sharp stings of memory

thronged to his brain as he stood for a while between the garden and the forest. His long childhood, steeped in the influence of nature in all her varying moods, rose up and set itself in bright pictures before him. How happy it had been, in spite of the restrictions of his home life! He had known no cares, and but few sorrows. The disappointments which had come to him and had been hard to bear at the time had been healed, and were now merged in the tale of happy years, their occurrence marked only in his memory by a gentle regret which bore no trace of bitterness. He penetrated again into the recesses of the forest, finding nothing changed, the very trees and green tracks familiar, calling up memories at every turn. He found the pool of the otter, and the great beech under whose shade he had thought out some of the difficulties that had presented themselves to his youth and early manhood. He had nothing to regret in the way his decision had turned out. He had decided rightly in every case, and was on the high road to a success greater than he could have hoped for. And yet his thoughts were full of sadness and unsatisfied longing. Of what value to him was all the interest of his life when the one gift he desired above all others was denied him? The interest had disappeared. For weeks he had worked without zest. He had nothing now to look forward to. Success in life had changed its colour, and was unrecognizable from the most dismal failure.

He was going presently to the forest glade behind the Hall to indulge once more in the now painful memories which that scene would call up in his mind. Then he was going away from Beechurst, perhaps never to visit it again, certainly never until the years had healed over the wound of his great disappointment, if that

time ever came. But first he had come to visit his mother's grave, more from a sense of duty than anything else, for his young mother was only a name to him. His father had never talked to him about her, or made any attempt to put before the eyes of his childhood a picture that he might carry with him through life.

The grave was simple, hardly distinguishable from those of the humble dead of the village which were grouped around it, but he saw, somewhat to his surprise, that it was well kept, with fresh flowers growing in its stone-bordered bed, as if it were constantly cared for. He wondered to himself whether his father, unknown to him, had left orders that it should be looked after. If so, it was unlike him, for he was a man of little sentiment, and had done nothing of the kind during the years he had lived within reach of it.

He heard the wicket gate of the churchyard shut to, and a step on the steep path hidden from him by the church. He turned round to see the figure of an elderly woman approaching him, which he did not at first recognize as that of his aunt. She walked slowly, almost feebly. Her once upright form had a slight stoop, and her hair was nearly white.

She recognized him at once, and the years seemed to drop away from her as she drew herself up and approached him with her old decision and self-confidence.

"Richard!" she said, "you here! I thought it was only I who remembered."

Richard looked down. "I am very glad you have remembered, Aunt Henrietta," he said, awkwardly.

"I think of her more and more as the years go by," she answered. "It seems to me that the longer I live the less I see of people like her. She was so good, and

she made others good. We want women like that in the world, and men too. We are all so selfish, so dreadfully selfish, and unhappy, for all our attempts to seize pleasure. I cannot understand why she should have been taken away. To me she was an irreparable loss."

She stood for a little time looking down on the grave. Then she looked up at him with her old air of self-assured command.

"But I am very disappointed in you," she said. "The very last time we met, and it was years ago, we came here together, and I thought we understood one another and were coming together again. Why did you never write to me as I asked you? I have heard no word of you from that day to this. Simply a short note from your father acknowledging the small present I made you, and that was all."

"I did write," said Richard. "I wrote to you twice, as you asked me. And when I had no reply I left off writing."

"You wrote?" she repeated. "Where did you write to?"

"I wrote to Bursgarth Hall in Yorkshire, as you told me to."

"To Burgarth? Then why did I not get the letters? Wait. Let me think. I went to Aix after I left the yacht, and was there for a month. But letters would have been forwarded, were forwarded. Are you sure you wrote?"

"Yes. Quite sure. I wrote twice within the month."

"Then there must have been some stupid blunder. I do not understand it. My husband was at Bursgarth, and sent on my letters himself. He is punctilious about those things, and would not leave it to a servant."

"I see," said Richard.

"And Laurence was there, too, but he would have nothing to do with redirecting letters. Well, I do not understand it. It is very unfortunate. I was so well disposed towards you, remembered you with pleasure, thought that our misunderstandings were over, my mistakes about you were cleared up and forgotten. I hoped to have seen much of you and watched your career. I own I put down your silence to the influence of your father. I was annoyed. I said to myself, 'Very well, if it is over, it is over,' and put you out of my mind. Now I hear it was another mistake. I am very sorry for it, very sorry indeed. You might have been much to me and helped me through the dull years. But we must begin again, Richard. It is not too late, even yet. Come and sit down, and tell me about yourself. You do not look happy, and yet I believe you are doing well, for I do hear your name sometimes among people who are interested in literature and art."

They sat down together on the seat under the yew tree, and Richard told her something of his life. He spoke quietly, even dejectedly, and she watched him narrowly as he unfolded his tale.

"You have done very well," she said. "It is agreeable to me to hear of a young man hard at work, making his own way in the world, not greedy for amusement. It is so different from what I see around me. But it is very plain that your success does not satisfy you. You want something more. How old are you now?"

"Twenty-nine," he told her.

"Then you are old enough to marry. I should like to see you with a sweet young wife at your side, and little children to gladden your life. I love children so dearly, and there are none who have any claims on

me. How I should like to have children around me now I am getting old. I am sure you ought to marry, Richard. Have you not thought of it yourself?"

"I do not think of it at all," Richard said, shortly.

"I suppose your life is too full to leave you time to go among people from whom you might choose a wife. And, living as you do in that poor suburb with your father, you would not come across them. But you must come to me, Richard, now that we have met again in friendliness. We must not let any further misunderstandings part us. I want someone of my own flesh and blood near me. I see many people. I will find you a wife. Like most elderly women I am a confirmed matchmaker."

She spoke gaily, but Richard answered her with seriousness. "Thank you, Aunt Henrietta," he said, "I should like to see you sometimes, but I cannot come to your house. I may as well say it frankly, I dislike Laurence Syde, and he dislikes me. I will never go again where I may be likely to meet him."

"Have you met Laurence of late years?" she asked, in surprise.

"Yes. And we never meet without showing our contempt for one another."

She sighed deeply. "I will not ask what you quarrel about," she said. "I can understand that you are antagonistic. Your lives are so different. You are forming your character, growing stronger and more self-reliant as you grow older. Laurence is selfish to the core. I have been forced to acknowledge it to myself. My affection for him is dead, and it is a bitter thought to me that I have had something to do with the way he has grown up. I deeply regret my indulgence of him. If I had the years over again I should act in

a very different way. But even then I doubt whether I should have had the force to influence him towards goodness. No, I am afraid not. Life is full of trouble and disappointment. You will not repeat what I say. I don't know why I say it to you. Outwardly we are good friends—my stepson and I, but we are nothing to each other, nothing real."

"I am very sorry, Aunt Henrietta. Of course I will say nothing."

"Even now," she went on, "I have a slight hope that he may yet make something of his life. He is going to marry—I hope he is going to marry—a very sweet girl who may change the whole current of his desires. I believe very much in marriage for a young man, if it is based on affection, as I think this marriage will be. The more a man loves his wife the more he respects himself. I shall do everything I can to help him in this."

Richard's heart sank like lead. "I suppose you mean that he is going to marry Miss Ventrey," he said in a low voice.

"How do you know that? Ah, of course, you knew her here as a child. She has told me so. She is the sweetest girl. And so true-hearted. He has won a great prize, and I hope he will realize how fortunate he has been. They will live here, I hope, and the influence of this quiet, beautiful place ought to steady him and make him happy. That, and the companionship of a good and true woman."

Richard was quite incapable of saying a word. He had not known that there was any spark of hope left in him until certainty had thus robbed him of everything. He was sick at heart, and longed only to get away by himself, away from every human voice, and grapple with his wretchedness. It was with a dull sense

of relief that he heard his aunt say, "Well, I must go home. Won't you come with me, Richard?"

He refused, braced himself up to say good-bye to her without giving her an opportunity of remarking on his depression, promised to write to her, and to see her when she would be again in London, and excused himself from accompanying her on her way with the plea that he did not wish to meet any one from the village, and was left alone.

He made his way across the fields and through the woods to the place where he had made up his mind to say good-bye to his hopes, and gather strength if he could to go on with his life, and wear down his disappointment. His pain was so great that he felt physically ill, and walked with difficulty. So this was the end of it all! He was not only to lose her, but to lose her to a man whom he knew to be utterly unworthy of her, a man—he was sure of it—who wanted her more for the sake of what she could bring him of wealth to help him to pursue his selfish pleasures than for her own dearness. And she had chosen this man, deceived by his poor surface attractions, blinded to his faults of character, and would be tied to him for life, wasting all her fine qualities on one who was incapable of recognizing them, growing sadder as the years went by, and he revealed his baseness to her. She was throwing away her happiness, her very life, and he who loved her could do nothing to warn her. He was the only one of all who wished her well who was debarred from warning her.

He came to the forest clearing where he had first met her, a little child, as free and innocent as the birds, the place in which every tree and bush held memories of her. The old house with its quiet gardens lay beneath him, the home which was hers, but would soon be hers no

longer, which would change its character, and from which all the gracious memories it enshrined would be wiped away by the traffic of an uneasy life of pleasure. He threw himself down on the ground, and buried his head in his arms. His life had become unsupportable. There was nowhere to look for a gleam of light. He was surrounded by the blackness of despair.

He did not know how long he lay there. He could not think consecutively. His brain seemed to be numbed. Sometimes a gust of hopeless anger came and shook his very soul. It was terrible to feel so helpless, and to know that the days would go on and carry her away from him irrevocably, carry her to what he knew would be a life of unhappiness and disillusion. He tried to think of something he could do. He made half-formed resolutions of going to her and telling her what he believed to be the truth about Laurence, while making it clear that he himself had nothing to hope from her. But his common sense rejected the idea. If she loved him, and Lettice was not a girl who would give her hand in marriage where she did not love, she would be indignant, scandalized. He would lose what poor remnants of her regard were still left to him, and that would be the only result of his interference. No, he could do nothing. He must suffer in silence. What would be would be.

Presently he lay quite still, worn out with the storm of feeling that had swept over him. The peace of the quiet forest began to steal over him. He turned his head and saw the long shadows of the summer afternoon drawn across the bright grass, heard the twitter of the birds busy with their small activities, smelt the sweetness of the bare earth and the woodland growth, and found his pain soothed somewhat, its edge blunted by the sym-

pathy which he had long since learnt to feel in nature.

Suddenly he was aware of a movement, and sprang up from the grass to find Lettice herself standing before him. She stood exactly in the spot in which he had first seen her as a child many years before, and looking at him with startled eyes, her hand on her breast. There was reason for her surprise, for he was haggard with suffering, and looked as if he had come out of a long illness.

"Dick!" she said, under her breath. "Are you ill?"

He came to himself at the sound of her voice. "You startled me," he said. "No, I am not ill, but I am in great trouble."

He paused, and she still looked at him, but without speaking. "I ought to wish you happiness, I suppose," he said. "God knows I do. I would give my life to make you happy. But I have only just heard, and the news has been too much for me."

A blush came over her face. "What news?" she asked. "What have you heard?"

"Must I say it? Well, I will. I must get used to it. I have just met my aunt, and she told me that you were going to marry Laurence Syde."

The blush deepened. "I am not," she cried. "It is not true." And then again, as he looked at her in astonishment, "I am not. I know they wish it, but it is not true."

He looked at her earnestly, and saw that there was no reserve behind her denial, that she meant it, for there was no mistaking the truth when you looked into the depths of Lettice's eyes. An enormous weight lifted itself from his mind and rolled away into the shadows in which he had walked. He lost control over himself and

laughed a great laugh, and went on laughing until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Dick," said Lettice, with anxious seriousness, "why do you behave so strangely?"

"My dear child!" he cried, turning towards her. "You have beckoned me out of hell. Say it again. Tell me that it isn't true."

"I don't understand you," she said. "But you are my oldest friend. I will tell you the truth. He has asked me, and I have said no. I could never have said anything else. If I had known he was going to ask me, I should not have come here."

"How glad I am that you did," he said. "I might never have known. For I don't suppose I shall see you very often. Yes, I should have known, but it might not have been for a long time."

"Why do you say that you will not see me?" she asked. "Oh, Dick, how you have changed. We were such friends when I was a child—here in this very place. Don't you remember, Dick, how we first met, just as we have met now? But how different it was then! How can you say after all these years that we shall not see each other again?"

"You make it rather hard for me, Lettice," he said, soberly. "You must know what a grief it is to me that we are not as we used to be to each other. We can't be. We lead utterly different lives. If I try to come amongst the people with whom you live I only suffer humiliation. They don't want me. I don't want them, either. I did want you, but think what it has been the few times I have seen you in London this summer, and then think of our old friendship, here in the forest. Think of the last time we met. We didn't even part as friends."

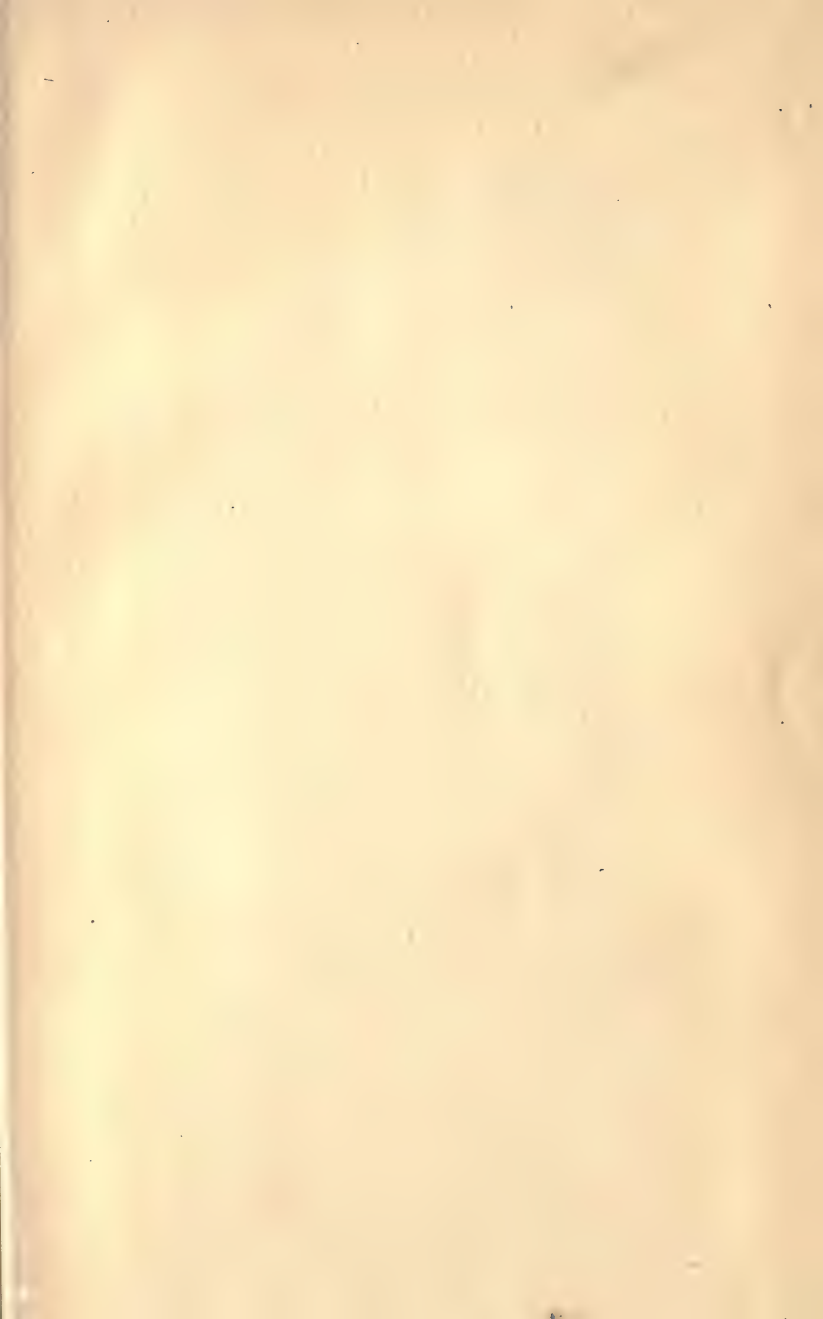
"I am very sorry for that, Dick," she said penitently. "It has given me great unhappiness to think of it. But you were not like yourself. I hardly knew you, there in London. I wanted to be friends, but you blamed me as if—— Oh, I don't know, but I felt sore at the way you spoke to me, and—and I know I was horrid to you."

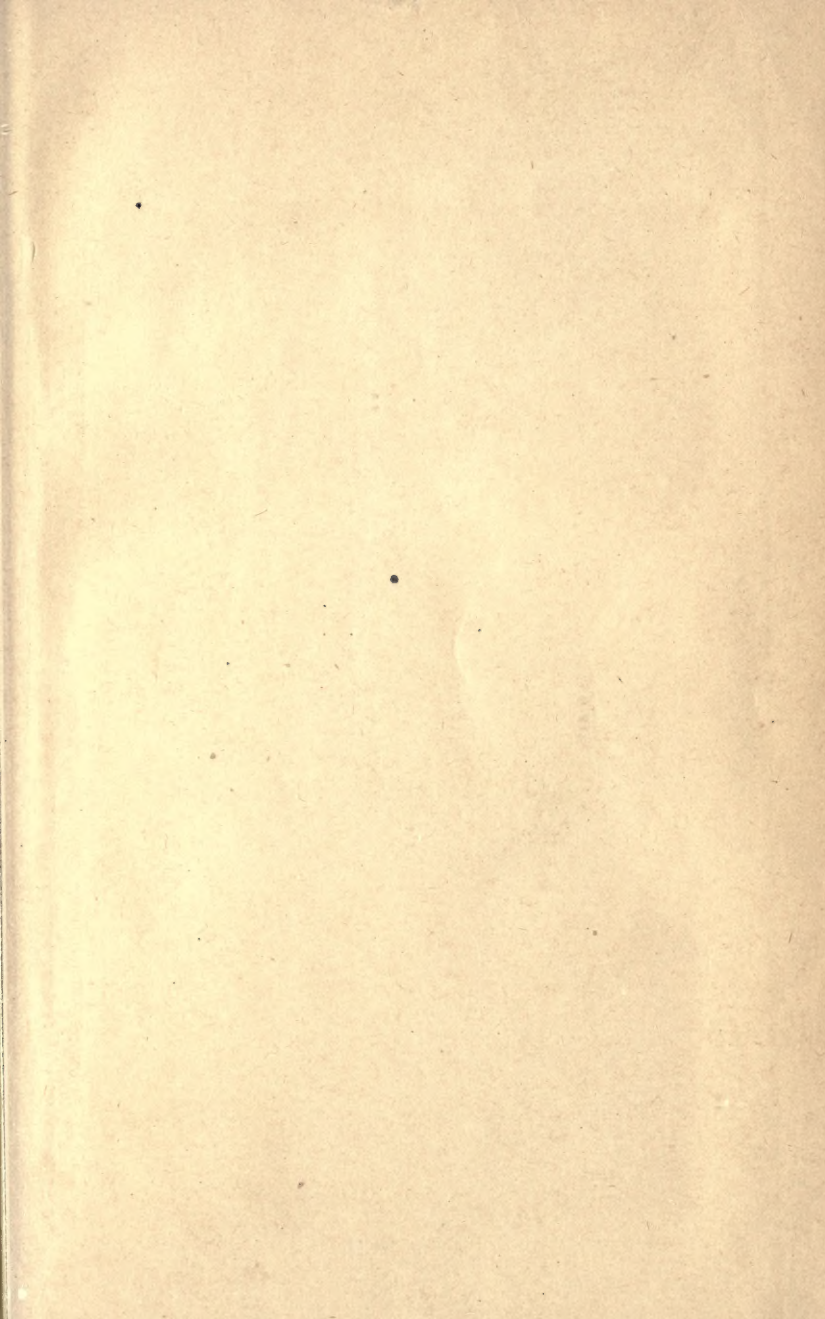
"I shan't think anything more about it," he said. "You have made me happier than I thought I could ever be again. And I shall always remember how happy we were together when I was a boy and you were a child. And, if you will let me, I will always be your friend, and I shall hope to see you sometimes; but not in London. We are too far apart there. Perhaps, sometimes, we shall meet here in the old forest. We can see each other as we are then, and forget that in London I am a dull young man who works and you are a beautiful young woman who plays, and are surrounded by other beautiful people who play too, as I never can."

He ended lightly, but devoured her face with his eyes, wistfully, for the shadow of loss was stealing over him again.

Her eyes were bent on the ground. A faint flush came over her cheeks, and spread, deepening. She looked up, and her eyes were shining. "Do you remember what I used to say to you here in the forest, Dick?" she said, bravely. "Tell me secrets."

THE END







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